



Civic Reinventions, Inc.

Reinventing Futures Through Strategic Conversation

ONE-TWO-FOUR-ALL MICROSTRUCTURE

BY MARK K. SMUTNY

I recently encountered a book on facilitation and creative meeting design, *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash a Culture of Innovation* by Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless. The book describes thirty methods to structure creative conversations on issues that matter. The authors use the term “liberating structures” to communicate that these methods liberate meetings to engage all voices and bring creativity. I explain several liberating structures elsewhere in this book.

Liberating structures are designed to avoid the pitfalls of some of the most common meeting designs: lecture, presentation, and brainstorming, to name a few. Such designs are often dominated by a few people, typically leading to boredom and low participation. Liberating structures, on the other hand, engage all participants, generate creativity, and, when used systemically, transform the culture of an organization toward greater inclusion.

The structures described in the book by Lipmanowicz and McCandless are ways to launch what the authors call “a culture of innovation.” Each is designed to include all voices. They liberate participants into more productive meetings.

One of my favorites from Lipmanowicz and McCandless is called *1-2-4-All*. The facilitator poses a creative question on an issue of concern to the group. For example, “How might we be the safest workplace in our city in the coming year?” Individuals take one minute to list key ideas on a piece of paper. Then, in pairs, each person quickly shares his or her ideas (two minutes). They notice similarities and patterns and strengthen their combined ideas. Next, pairs combine into groups of four to share, compare, and coalesce ideas in four

minutes. The final stage is a plenary session: the “All” in *1-2-4-All*. Each group of four shares one key idea with the whole group, popcorn style, avoiding duplication. The results are recorded for all to see on large post-it notes or a whiteboard.

In fifteen to twenty minutes, *1-2-4-All* harvests the collective wisdom of a group with everyone’s participation. In a short time, *1-2-4-All* generates energy, excitement, and engagement. Unlike groups in which someone drones on and on, or a hearing in which people give two-minute speeches, the results from *1-2-4-All* are wildly democratic. No one sits quietly unless they ask to pass. The group is set free to create and innovate. It’s really cool.

I used *1-2-4-All* in the second of two transportation summits to craft ideas for strengthening the way seniors and persons with disabilities secure transportation. The first of these summits lasted five hours. We completed two World Café rounds, plus announcements, breaks, and lunch. It was wildly successful, generated important results and positive feedback. The second summit needed to pack in many of the same items, as well as a 30-minute resource fair—but in three hours instead of five.

Because each World Café round takes ninety minutes, we needed a different design that would fit the reduced timeframe. So, we used one round of *1-2-4-All* followed by one round of a World Café. We budgeted twenty minutes for *1-2-4-All* and ninety minutes for the World Café. Both methods engaged participants in widening circles of conversation. Each created energy. Each mined the collective imagination of all participants like gold from ore. It was, again, a successful summit.

The *1-2-4-All* question was simply, “What challenges do I face when searching for transportation?” Eighty voices engaged at once. Each person was seen and heard. The room was abuzz like bees excited about their queen. At the plenary harvest, the collective experience popped from the crowd. In the space of twenty minutes, every participant had contributed his or her thoughts. Each heard the ideas of the others. Inviting the group to

participate in a *One-Two-Four-All* design got the summit off to an incredible start.

The list of liberating structures is ever expanding. I encourage you to grab a copy of the book and visit the website at <http://www.liberatingstructures.com>. Your meetings will be transformed from deadly and dull to delightful.

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