Methodologies for Dialogue and Conversation

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The book, AfterNow: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin, is almost a Reader’s Almanac of ideas about how we step forward into an uncertain future. I believe that stepping forward is done best together and that deep, rich, intimate conversation and dialogue is what helps us find enough clarity and courage to take the first step.

For many years I have worked with many others to practice good conversation. I got my start as one of the early facilitators of community meetings back in the 70s and then, this century, deepened my practice as one of the founders of the Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter community (www.artofhosting.org). My experience as a conversation host grew with work in many communities in Japan after the Triple Disasters.

Hosting deep, delightful, powerful and meaningful conversation is not about knowing and using the right methodology. It’s much more mysterious. It is something you feel in your belly and in your heartmind.

At the same time, many processes and practices can be helpful in creating dialogues, in helping us find our way forward. So just let me share a few ideas and thoughts about different ways to be together, different methods,¹ and a bit about choosing what to do when. For many – especially those with a deep practice of these approaches – they are as much a way of seeing and standing in the world as they are a methodology for dialogue and conversation. As you review the steps, don’t worry about memorizing them, rather let their essence settle into you and trust that you’ll know how and when to use them.

¹ Practices offered here draw, in particular, from insights in the Art of Hosting Community, the World Cafe Community and the Open Space Community as well.
It begins with creating a good BA

In FutureSessions, different methodologies bring powerful conversations to life. Even before giving an overview of some core methods, as you read AfterNow, you’ll notice one of the key words I return to again and again is BA. It is the air we breathe, the space that surrounds us, the connections we weave and much more. I’ve noticed time and time again that creating BA that invites the respect, curiosity and generosity is essential for deep, generative dialogue. How is this BA created; what must be attended to any time we invite others together into discovery, co-creation, learning and action? Please take a look at AfterNow again to review some of what I have written about BA. References crop up throughout the book, but Chapter 3 is a good place to get an overview.

Create Hospitable Space. When people enter a room that has been set up for a FutureSession, they immediately know they have entered a special place! We work with what we have to make the room as beautiful and inviting as possible. Clutter and unnecessary furniture are removed; flowers grace the space; there’s a welcoming entrance with people warming greeting others as they arrive and inviting them into conversation, a space that will encourage people to lean forward to listen to each other and to speak their own truths.

Consider issues that are real and important. FutureSessions works with topics that the participants really care about. They are the subjects people want to talk about, NOW. This work isn’t about “making nice” or getting trapped into conversations that are dull and boring. Our intent is to rouse the intelligence, wisdom, passions and perspectives that are present, and sometimes hidden, in the room.

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2 AfterNow emerged from my work in Japan where I’ve often used the term “FutureSessions” as a way to describe what I am doing. That’s the term that has become somewhat popularized in Japan, just as Art of Hosting has been in the US and Europe and other parts of the world. These names are just descriptors, ways of marking the territory, and an invitation to deep dialogue and powerful conversation.
**Explore questions that matter.** Participatory processes are built around powerful questions – ones that invite participants to reach deeply into their experience and their dreams. Powerful questions, such as – *What is possible here, now, that was not possible before?* – cause us to pause and consider before answering. They invite us to speak a truth which otherwise might not find a way to enter the room. Appendix A offers a number of powerful questions as potential catalysts for conversation.

**Invite in passion, embrace conflict.** Sometimes we wake in the middle of the night with questions and concerns that will not leave us alone. Often we have no place where we can really work with these issues. We think we have to keep these things to ourselves, trying to work them out in our heads before we share them with anyone. FutureSessions provide a forum for dialogue about the things that concern us the most. When we engage with each other with curiosity, respect and generosity, our differences and our conflicts become more information – not something we have to resolve.

**Engage as much difference as you can handle.** Dialogue thrives with diversity. And there are so many kinds of diversity readily available. First the demographic ones – age, gender, race, culture, economic status, location. Next the situational ones – professions, learning, experience, worldview.

People who come with different ideas, experiences and perspectives see things differently. No surprise there. But these differences are often hidden. Consider opening your session to diverse others, and pay attention to ensure that they feel welcome. You and your team do this, of course, by truly welcoming them yourselves and listening, listening, listening. Holding the tension of difference without collapsing into premature compromise or storming off in anger allows us to see new possibilities.

**Encourage each person’s contribution.** We design FutureSessions so participants are both eager to share their own perspective AND to hear the thoughts and contributions of others. We use a variety of methodologies to meet the focus and opportunities in each part of a FutureSession. We consciously invite the quiet voices into the dialogue. We also invite silence in, creating space for understanding to deepen.
Connect diverse people and ideas. In a FutureSession we are always looking for connections between the insights and experiences people offer. When working with participatory processes, we use the kinds of methods described in this Appendix to connect people in the room with each other, sharing their stories and experiences.

Make emerging knowledge visible. In using these methodologies, we continually “harvest” what is shared in small group conversations and ask that it be spoken into the whole and whenever possible we use “visual harvesting”3 with graphic recorders or photographers or videographers to make what’s going on in the room visible to the whole. These visible connections lead to deeper insights and more powerful proposals for action.

Dance with both complexity and simplicity. Not everything is complex and not everything is simple! The Cynefin Model described beginning on page 180 in Chapter 6 suggests that many different challenges and opportunities exist in the same space. Sometimes topics in FutureSessions are both complex and multi-layered. Other times they are simple and straightforward. All are welcome.

Listen together for patterns, insights and deeper questions. As we make those connections, patterns begin to emerge – if we’re watching for them. When we pause and really listen to our dialogue, new insights and deeper questions emerge. These are the hidden treasures in a FutureSession. Look for them!

Share collective knowledge. Finally, in FutureSessions, we are always working to make the knowledge emerging in the room explicit and visible so we can use it to guide our next steps! A key part of this is illuminating what we are seeing in the room so it is visible outside the room so we can invite others into subsequent sessions and work. This means taking the raw material from the gatherings and writing articles, producing videos, sharing in social media and the like – illuminating what’s been surfaced to inspire and inform others.

3 Drawn Together through Visual Practice, to which I contributed a chapter, gives a delightful overview of visual harvesting practices.
Working in the BA to Generate Dialogues:

There are many ways to host good dialogue. These are the ones I keep returning to:

- Circle
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Storytelling Trios
- World Café
- Open Space Technology
- ProAction Café
- NOWCast

The following pages give a brief overview of each of these approaches. But don't become overly focused on the details. Open yourself up to the underlying patterns and energy present in each approach and play with them!

Circle Practices:

For millennia people, all over the world have met in circles to listen closely to each other and speak their truths. When we sit together in a circle, everyone is on “equal-footing.” There is no head table; in fact, there are no tables to hide behind! Participants don’t have an assigned place – we are just there together. We see everyone who is in the room. The whole system is visible to all.

Many people around the world have done extensive work about how to use “circle” for dialog. When I use the term circle I am describing an intentional process of sitting together in a circle specifically to share truths, listen and learn. My own work with circle has been guided for almost 20 years by the work of PeerSpirit, developed origi-
nally by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea⁴ and now being evolved by a practitioner community.

Circle is where we speak to, see and listen to everyone in the room present at any time. In FutureSessions, we keep coming back to the circle as our foundation:

We begin FutureSessions with check-in circles. They help participants get present in the room and see who else is there. Sometimes check-ins are “low-risk” – a person just gives their name and some affiliations. Sometimes they go deeper when we ask people to share a bit about their own personal mood with a check-in question. Other times we ask people to check in with a gesture or body movement to bring themselves present.

We usually use check-out circles to end FutureSessions. People are asked to share a key learning or to mention what steps they may take next. They may be asked to do something non-verbally or to summarize all of their feelings in a single word. The purpose is to make the whole community visible to itself before closing.

Discernment circles are where we use dialogue to consider issues of importance to the whole community. When there are a large number of participants in a FutureSession, discernment circles need to be handled with care – asking people to speak briefly and clearly about what is needed for the benefit of the whole community.

Things to remember in fostering good circle dialogues include:

**Choosing two key people to hold the space**
- **Host.** This is the person who calls the circle together and facilitates the process of circle.

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⁴ Christina and Ann are dear friends and their [http://www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com) website is filled with insights and resources on Circle Practices. Together with friends, they have also created [http://www.thecircleway.net](http://www.thecircleway.net) which is a rich collection of resources.
• **Guardian.** This person watches the time commitments in circle, invites the silence of a pause when something key has just been spoken, and when needed, asks that people speak with more brevity.

**Using Practices – ways of being with each other – to guide the dialogue**

• **Listen with attention.** Listen with your whole mind and all your emotions to what is being spoken in the circle. Suspend judgment and listen as deeply as you can.

• **Speak with intention.** Speak from your clarity and from your confusion. Offer what you can and ask for what you need. Speak from the place of your listening to what is present now in the circle. Don’t spend time thinking what you want to say, listen and speak from your heart.

• **Tend to the well-being of the group.** Remain aware of what you and the group need to realize your purpose.

• **Be present and be curious!** There is something growing in the middle of the circle that is greater than what each participant brings.

• **Respect confidences.** We often say that what is spoken in circle stays in the circle. You can share your own learning, but don’t repeat other people’s stories.

• **Honor silence.** Silence is an important part of the conversation. Let the silence linger until you truly have something meaningful to offer.

**Beginning a Circle**

• **Invoke presence:** Invite everyone to be fully present in the room. Words of welcome, a meaningful poem which invites a receptive, contemplative space, a time for meditation, or a moment of silence all are ways to invite people to be fully present to what is about to happen.

• **Speak the purpose:** Remind people why it is we have gathered together – even if you think everyone knows it already.
• **Always have a good question:** We gather because of questions. Speak the ones which have called this particular circle into the world.

• **Check-in:** Sometimes suggest everyone say their name with a word or two, or share a sentence introducing themselves, or suggest they turn to one or two people close-by and check in with each other.

**Hosting the Circle Together**

• **Use a listening tool.** A “talking object”\(^5\) often plays an important role in a circle. The person with the talking object gets to speak – everyone else gets to listen! Pretty simple – and it keeps attention focused.

• **Use different modes.** There are numerous ways of being in a circle. Use them all! Sometimes pass a talking object around the circle to explicitly invite everyone’s voice into the room. Sometimes use a more “popcorn” style where people around the circle speak when they feel called to do so. Or break people into smaller groups – pairs or trios – to have a more intense dialogue with each other. Practice with different ways of being in circle.

• **Harvest.** Make what is happening in the small groups and side conversations visible to the circle. Make visible what has occurred and what is alive in the circle as a whole – knowledge, energy, relationships, questions.

• **Reflect.** Always provide space for people to reflect on what is happening, what they are seeing, and what they are learning.

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\(^5\) Talking objects are used as part of many dialogue approaches. A talking object makes the dialogue more accessible to all. People who tend to talk too much are quieter. Those who are less inclined to talk or jump in with their words; find a way to do so. A talking object also slows the dialogue, leaving more space for thoughtful reflection. Their use is simple: holding the talking object means you speak. When another holds it, it means you listen.
Ending a Circle

- **Check-out.** Create the space for people to check-out with a word or a gesture which signifies what is happening now for them.
- **Seal the space.** The host should offer a closing thought or observation which brings the circle to a formal end.
- **Release the space.** A circle builds up energy! Release people from this intense listening and learning as they move forward into a less formal social space or into other types of dialogue activities. Often getting people on their feet and doing something with their bodies is key here.

I think of circle as the foundation of dialogue work. We move from circle into other forms, but keep coming back to it whenever it is important to see the whole.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a way for people to create change in systems by discovering and amplifying what’s working. Often in business life we are pre-occupied with problems. We look for what isn’t working and then try to figure out how to fix it. Appreciative Inquiry takes the opposite approach.

Using a four-part process of *Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny,* Appreciative Inquiry (AI) invites us to discover what is already working, dream about what might be possible if we amplified what’s working, design what it is we can see happening next, and follow those designs to their destiny. Formulated by David Cooperrider and others in the 1980s at Case Western Reserve University in the United States, a variety of resources are available at their website:

In a FutureSession, AI work often begins in pairs, with two people interviewing each other and exploring questions that matter. These questions are often very simple – they look for essence!

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6 Appreciative Inquiry is now known and practiced all over the world. Find excellent resources at [www.appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu](http://www.appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu)
What is working? Rather than asking people to focus on problems, AI asks people to find what is currently working. If we concentrate on this as a starting point, the problems around which we were stuck often simply disappear. It is not so much that old issues and problems get resolved. They just become irrelevant.

What is possible? Often, we spend a lot of time complaining about problems. When we focus on what is not working our conversations often turn into complaint sessions that drain everyone’s energy and do not change anything. Instead, if we ask what is possible, we can engage our imaginations and invite in ideas and opportunities from a broader arena.

Where is the spark of “yes?” This is such an interesting question! Just asking someone to think about what they are ready to say “YES!” to, opens up the energy in a system. We are often trapped in our “NOs,” heavily invested in them in a way that makes it impossible to see a way forward.

What solution is calling to be born? By sensing into the middle of an AI dialogue, we can begin to catch sight of something that is there, on the edge of our vision, waiting to be born.

Sometimes this pair work is done with “knees touching” – two people sitting really close together in a room. Other times it is done as a dialogue walk punctuated liberally by silence.

After this work in pairs, we will often do a “harvest,” asking four or five people to share with the entire group what was most important about what they heard – or said. This harvesting keeps connecting everyone back to the whole so that we can see the patterns and learning emerging.

Often, spending time in AI pairs opens up people’s minds and hearts – they begin to discover things they hadn’t known before. The intensity of an AI interview brings ideas, information, knowledge and experience to the surface so it can be used in a variety of ways in a FutureSession.
From the intimacy of AI, we will often move into other forms for explorations, brainstorming, idea generation and the like. Usually the intimacy we have felt in an exchange with our partners in an AI pair or storytelling trio extends into a sense of trust for others present as well.

**Story Telling Trios:**

I frequently use story-telling trios. I learned the approach from my friend and colleague Mary-Alice Arthur when she, my spouse Susan, daughter Annie, Yuya Nishimura and I were the hosting team in 2011 for an Art of Hosting Participatory Leadership in Thailand.

I use trios both as a way to connect a group of people with each other and to experience a space of deep speaking and deep listening. The structure is pretty simple.

Form people into random groups of three. There are three roles and each person rotates through each role:

- The person telling the story
- The person inviting the story and asking questions from time to time
- The person witnessing the storyteller with deep listening

It all begins with a question that matters – a question which asks someone to reach deeply into their own story. One of my favorite questions lately has been to ask people to remember a time in their life when they encountered a disaster – an external catastrophe like a hurricane, or an internal one such as a divorce, job loss or death. Then I ask them not to tell about the disaster itself, but to talk about how they found their way forward.

Depending on the time available, I usually give the storyteller 7-10 minutes to tell their story. The person inviting the story chimes in from time to time for clarifica-

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7 Mary-Alice is a world class story-teller and dialogue host. Find out more about her at [www.getsoaring.com](http://www.getsoaring.com)
tion or to invite them to go deeper. It’s not a dialogue, but sometimes questions help us explore different aspects of our story. Then, when the storyteller finishes, I ask the witness who has been listening deeply to speak back the essence of what they’ve heard. Generally, I give anywhere from 2-5 minutes for this speaking back, depending on the time available.

I always keep track of the time for the participants, ringing my bells when it is time for the storyteller to conclude and the witness to begin, and then ringing when it is time for the next storyteller to begin. Often one trio or more hasn’t listened very clearly to directions – or I forget to say something – so there can be a little confusion in these timings. But it all works out.

After all three people have been in all three roles, we do a harvest to make what was going on in the trios visible in the whole room. The trios themselves become close and intimate – which we want – and we also want to demonstrate that this experience of closeness is a common one and that often there are patterns or underlying themes in the stories.

Depending on the time available I’ll ask for harvesting at a process as well as a content level. I’ll ask people to describe what it was like to really be listened to. Then I’ll ask them what it was like to witness and listen. I’ll continue and ask them to share something they heard – or something they said – that felt important and noteworthy.

I often use storytelling trios in the beginning of a FutureSession to connect the room, but they can be used anywhere that you want to invite a deep exploration of personal experiences: after World Cafe for consistency.
World Café

World Café is popular all around the world. A global community of stewards that formed 25 years ago nurtures the spread of the World Café. Juanita Brown and David Isaacs’ book, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* supports the practice of thousands. Why this popularity? World Café is an easy and natural way to make the knowledge and wisdom in a room visible. It quickly lets us know what many people are thinking about a particular topic. For more information about this process, the World Café’s rich website\(^8\) has a wide array of resources.

We make frequent use of World Café early on in FutureSessions because WC lets us quickly access the knowledge and wisdom of the whole. We use World Café anytime we want to surface the collective intelligence present in the room. Often there are multiple World Cafes during any Future Session.

**How it works**

So how does this “magic” happen? There are some simple steps that create the form of World Café.

- *Usually a team of two people hosts a World Café session.* These hosts are deeply committed to the questions being explored and are fully present in the space.

- *Intimate spaces for dialogue with groups of four people.* The room is set up with small tables with four chairs around each table. Four seems to be an optimum size. Much bigger and it is harder to self-facilitate. Much smaller and there’s not enough diversity of experience. There’s paper for doodling and note taking on the tables, along with many colored pens and perhaps even modeling clay. Sometimes a talking object is there to bring all voices in around the table.

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\(^8\) Juanita Brown and David Isaacs humbly refer to themselves as the “co-finders,” not “co-founders” of the World Café. They and friends “found” it in their living room one rainy afternoon. Like Christina and Ann, David and Juanita are dear friends. We have walked together for many years. See more about the work of World Cafe at [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)
• *Café rounds of 15-30 minutes.* People take any seat they want. There are typically several rounds of 15-30 minutes each, followed by a “harvest” in which insights from different tables are shared in the whole room. A café surfaces ideas and possibilities and connects them. Generally, it is not the best place for a really deep and long conversation – we can host those well in a Circle for things everyone cares about or in Open Space where smaller groups of people want to go in depth on a particular topic. World Café sessions surface and then connect what’s in the room.

• *Table hosts connect one round to the next.* As a round is completed, each table selects one person who stays at the table while others travel to new tables. The table host begins the next round of the café with a short summary of what was said at the table and invites people to share insights from their tables in the previous round.

• *Questions – sometimes new, sometimes continued.* Sometimes in subsequent rounds of café, new questions are asked and sometimes the previous question is asked again. Often the team hosting the whole World Café make a very quick assessment about which is most likely to best serve the dialogue. Is there more here to be uncovered? Will a continued dialogue with a different group of people around the same question produce more insights? Or is it time to come at the dialogue from a different direction with a new question? There is no single right answer.

• *Make the whole visible.* Every couple of rounds, it is important to “harvest” into the whole room. Sometimes inviting or calling on people from different tables does this quickly – what are you noticing in your dialogue? Sometimes taking a pause and asking people to write the most important idea they are holding on a sticky and having everyone post those stickies in the front of the room. Sometimes there is even a dialogue that will begin to occur in the whole system as these different insights are called forward.

• Often, I use World Café for divergence – to make the range of often contradictory and sometimes oppositional ideas and thinking about a topic visible and accessible to the whole. In less time than just about any other approach, it opens up the knowledge and wisdom present in the room so we can use it as we move ahead.
Open Space Technology:

Open Space Technology (OST)\(^9\) creates time and space for people to engage deeply and creatively around issues of concern to them. It is a simple and powerful way to catalyze effective working conversations and truly invite organizations to thrive in times of swirling change. It is an effective process for organizations and communities to identify critical issues, give voice to their passions and concerns, learn from each other, and, when appropriate, take collective responsibility for finding solutions.

How it Works

In our work with FutureSessions, Open Space frequently comes in the middle of our dialogue processes. We've already spent time in a circle, seeing and being with the whole community. We've spent time in World Café surfacing the knowledge and experience present in the room. We've spent some time in pairs or trios going more deeply around questions of importance to the whole community. Now, we're ready for the deep dive of Open Space where we can explore particular issues in depth.

Many hands and voices make the set-up of Open Space easy. Different people or even teams can be assigned to the various elements which include:

- Principles, Roles and Law
- Marketplace
- Sessions
- Harvest

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\(^9\) Open Space Technology has its own large community of practitioners. Learn more at: [www.openspaceworld.net](http://www.openspaceworld.net)
**Principles, Roles and Law of Open Space**

As with any of these methodologies, it is often helpful to have a two-person hosting team. Sometimes more. A session typically begins with one of the hosts explaining the four principles, four roles and one law of Open Space. Often these are illustrated with a touch of beauty on the walls of the room.

The four principles are:

1. **Whoever comes are the right people.** Trust the process. When you offer an Open Space session, you may be thinking, “I hope Janice comes.” And then Janice doesn’t come. She has gone someplace else. But the people who show up for your session are the ones who really care about your topic. They have the creativity and insights needed. Work with them! Sometimes the caller (the person who convened the session – see below) is the only person – what a gift. You now have 15 minutes or an hour of quiet time to really clarify your own thinking.

2. **Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.** Again, trust the process. Whatever happens is exactly right – nothing else could have happened. You’ve had a good dialogue about a subject of importance and you and the other participants leave with more insight and clarity.

3. **When it starts is the right time.** You just begin the dialogue. People arrive, you see each other, and you begin to talk about things that are important to you. Nothing else is needed.

4. **When it’s over, it’s over.** Sometimes a dialogue you thought would take a full hour is complete in 15 minutes. The central issues have been raised and resolved. The dialogue is complete. How wonderful – now you can all join another session. Sometimes the allocated time has passed quickly and there is still much more to discuss; together participants figure out when to continue.

The four roles are:

1. **Caller.** Someone offers a session. They begin the whole process. They offer a session about something they really care about and others come.
2. **Participant.** People come, eagerly. They join the sessions they really care about, when they want to learn and/or where they believe they can make a contribution.

3. **Butterfly.** Some people can't choose which session to join. Perhaps they just need a little quiet time. They go off on their own and look like beautiful butterflies. Sometimes two or more butterflies come together and begin a dialogue and a new session is created.

4. **Bumblebees.** Some people become bumblebees. They care about multiple topics and want to join different sessions. They go from session to session, often sharing ideas they heard in the last session. Just as real bees cross-pollinate flowers, these participants add to the wealth and wisdom in the room. They connect ideas in real time.

There is one law:

*The Law of Mobility:* If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can. This is really important. Sometimes we sit politely and nod or try to make a contribution in a dialogue, but really, we're not there. In fact it turns out that we don't care all that much about what's being said and our mind is on something else. When this happens, be courageous. Leave, go somewhere else! We are sometimes conditioned to think it is impolite to leave a group. Actually, it is more impolite to stay when we really aren't present. Follow your passion. Find your energy. This is your precious time – use it well!

**Open Space Marketplace**

Another host opens the Open Space Marketplace. This is where callers step forward to name the topics they offer to convene. People are usually seated in a circle; in the middle of the circle are markers and paper. There is a grid or matrix on the wall. Across the top of the grid are designated meeting areas, usually one area for each ten people in the gathering. Along the side of the grid are the beginning times for each session. Other than that, the grid is blank, waiting for people to step forward with their topics.
The host literally calls the energy and passion of people into the room by announcing the overall theme of the open space. Sometimes the theme is very broad and exploratory, such as, *What Else Might a School Be?* Other times it is very focused, *What Are the Next Steps We Will Take to Improve Community Health?* When it is appropriate to have a specific focus, Open Space can be a fertile working space in which preliminary ideas develop into plans and next steps.

A host explains how much time is available for the upcoming sessions. The host then “opens the space” and invites people to step forward, write their topic on a piece of paper, sign their name, and choose a time and location on the grid.

Often there’s a little “drama” in beginning of an Open Space session. Sometimes space is opened and nothing visible happens for a while; some people are shy, others may be confused, and some are thinking about what they want to propose. Other times, the space is immediately filled with people stepping forward to offer sessions on topics they are passionate about. The job of the marketplace host is to stay calm and inviting, and to keep the space open. Sometimes the host will say something a little provocative, such as “What is the question you will wake with in the middle of this night wishing you had been courageous enough to bring into Open Space?”

People will begin to step forward and often, in an instant, the marketplace grid will be filled. Sometimes people add meeting places because there wasn’t enough room on the grid for their topic. Sometimes those who offer a session see that someone else is offering something very similar and they ask that the sessions be combined. It is important to keep it simple – leave the calling of sessions to people who step forward and avoid getting caught in negotiations about topics!

Practice patience and hold clear intention about the purpose of the Open Space and allow the marketplace to become a self-organizing space.

**Sessions**

Open Space sessions come in all sorts of sizes. Sometimes the hosts will decide to have multiple short sessions – sometimes as brief as 15 minutes. In other cases, they
will provide the opportunity for more depth with sessions of an hour or more. Time frames are established based on the time available and the hosting team’s sense of the depth of dialogue that will best serve the community at that time.

Some hosts take a very “hands off” approach once sessions begin, using the “it’s over when it is over” principle and leaving people to end and move on to another session. Some hosts are a bit more directive, ringing bells and intervening in other ways to suggest a move from one set of session to the next.

Harvest

In the harvest at the end of the Open Space we’re not looking for a full report – just enough information back from each session to give all the participants a sense of what is happening in the broader field. Often we will use a simple sheet of paper for the harvest from each session. The paper will have some simple categories like “key insights,” “complexities,” “next steps,” and “participants.” After one or more rounds of Open Space, participants return to the circle and share their harvest. Encourage both clarity and brevity as insights are shared.

Open Space Technology is simple and effective. It works. People come together around the things they really care about and they generate new collective insight, knowledge and wisdom, and next steps forward.

ProAction Café:

People around the world have been experimenting with various methodologies where participants carefully explore the work several people in the room are engaged in. I have often used a methodology called ProAction Café. It blends aspects of World Café and Open Space to really let people get clear about a particular topic.

ProAction Cafés are often one of the last activities in a multi-day dialogue. People are getting ready to step back into their lives and want clarity about how to proceed with something important to them. They’ve been in many other sessions – Circle, World
Café, Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space. Through those processes, they have talked with a number of people and started to trust those present in the gathering. Now they are ready to use the knowledge and wisdom of the community to get clear about their own next steps.

ProAction Café uses a very strict structure, intended to give in-depth consulting to those who call a session. It follows the principles and guidelines of both Open Space and World Café.

**How it Works**

- **Begin in a circle.**

- **Count the people in the room who will be participating.** Divide that number by four. This is the number of separate café tables that you need to make available. In other words, if there are 40 people in the gathering, there will be 10 tables. This mathematical structure – number of participants divided by 4 – creates a boundary, limiting the number of tables and creating a small enough group that each caller can easily listen to everyone who comes to their table.

- **Create a matrix like the one for Open Space.** There’s no expansion of this grid – the number of tables is equal to the number of participants divided by four.

- **Invite people to step forward** and announce their topics and place them on the marketplace grid – just as in Open Space. In some cases, the topic may be an important question the caller is considering, or it may be a project they are undertaking, or it might be a place where they are stuck.

- **Host the conversation.** The conversation is divided into three rounds. The caller stays at the same table with his or her question for all three rounds. The participants go to different tables for each round.

- **Set the Timing for the Rounds:** Each round is about 30 minutes. Between each of the three rounds, there is a ten-minute break for everyone but the callers. The participants leave the room and the room becomes quiet. The callers take this time to digest what they’ve heard, journaling, and organizing their own thoughts.
The time allocated for a ProAction Café is often 2-3 hours. A typical schedule might be:

- **20 minutes:** Instructions and Marketplace
- **30 minutes:** Round One
- **10 minutes:** Caller Reflection Time
- **30 minutes:** Round Two
- **10 minutes:** Caller Reflection Time
- **30 minutes:** Round Three
- **10 minutes:** Caller Reflection Time
- **30 minutes:** Harvest

Each round of the ProAction Café has a different focus. Typically, the flow is:

- **Round One: Shift the Question.** The caller brings his or her question to the Café – one that is really important to them. It might be about a project they are getting ready to launch, it might be about a turning point in their life, it might be an intractable problem which just won’t go away. The first round of the café typically ends up exploring the question behind the question. This comes about as each participant challenges the caller to help find the deeper meaning of the question they’ve asked. So the first version of the question that someone uses to invite others to their table might not be their final question.

- **Round Two: Explore what is missing.** Once the question has been refined in the first round, the participants consider: what would make the picture more complete? What is a question not asked yet? What are perspectives or options not yet considered?

- **Round Three: What is the next step?** This round helps to consolidate learning into action steps. Callers share what they are learning with participants in the third round. Participants question, challenge, offer consultation and perspective. The callers clarify what next steps they will take.
The ProAction Café ends with a harvest. Each person who called and hosted the session around their inquiry shares what happened at their table and what they take away from it. If time allows, others can share their insights and experience.

Of course, the ProAction Café hosts may come up with different questions and timing. The intent is to have powerful questions guide the three rounds which allow the callers to focus and use the considerable expertise that is present in the room.

**NOWCast:**

This one is new and still a prototype. It grew from AfterNow and I want to include it here because I am using it so much these days.

In the fall of 2015, after the publication of the Japanese edition of my book, I was hosting a FutureSession with a friend of mine in Okayama. He’s a businessman turned professor with a deep dedication to FutureSessions. He was opening our session and talking for longer than we had agreed. It was a short session anyway, and I started to get a little annoyed.

Towards the end of his remarks, he mentioned backcasts and forecasts. Backcasts being a way of viewing where we are and need to be based on our imagined future. I don’t remember why. My irritation sparked a breakthrough, I thought, what good are forecasts or backcasts if we cannot see the future? A forecast looks out to a visible future so we can make a path leading to it. Similarly a backcast looks back from a visible future to help make the path. Similar and different, both of them are anchored in a visible future.

Let me backtrack just a bit into my own learning process. As I mentioned earlier in this book, my Japanese publisher chose the title for the Japanese edition. The words are subtler than the English translation we eventually agreed on: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin? The question in this title began to work on me immediately and I saw that it really was the core of my work. But I had spent most of my life one of the labels I used for myself was “futurist.” If I don’t place my attention on the future, where do I place it? Flying to Japan just before this session in Okayama...
an answer came to me, in the form of the title for this edition: AfterNow. This came from the growing realization that our attention needs to be placed on the right now, the right here, on the people we’re with and on what we have to begin. Suddenly, I started to see that it was all about having a NOWCast – a focus on the NOW.

Several weeks later I was back in the U.S. talking about this with a friend, Charles Holmes, a master facilitator from Vancouver, B.C., who said, “Hold on, backcasting is casting from the future back to the present. Forecasting is casting from the present into the future. Where’s a NOWCast casting?” Put on the spot, an answer came immediately: A NOWCast is casting into our ever present now, casting deep within ourselves to surface and make explicit things we already know.

**How it Works**

I usually use NOWCasts later on in FutureSessions – after we’ve been cooking together for a while and it is time to see what is ready to burst into life.

- *Begin in silence.* When possible I send people outside into nature for 30 minutes to an hour and ask them to reflect on what they’ve been thinking and learning in our time together. If we don’t have a way to be out in nature, I ask them to find a space in the room or building that allows for some space for reflection. I ask them to spend part of their time considering: *What’s really important to me? What is it that gives me meaning as I live my life?*

- *Return to the circle.* After taking the time to reflect, we all come back together in our meeting room, and gather in a circle. I ask people to take a few minutes to write – in big letters on 8 ½ x 11 paper – their headline about what’s important now. Not the whole story – just the headline.

- *Mill around inside the circle in silence.* Next people hold their sheets of paper in front of them and walk inside the circle in silence, just reading what others have written.

- *Form groups based on resonance and attraction.* Then I ask people to form groups of 3-5 with others where they feel a resonance. These are a little like something
called “magnet tables,” but this part of the process is still a little rough and I don’t think I’ve got it right yet. Something more is needed in this design.

• **Complete four sentences, together.** Over a period of 40 minutes, I ask each group to reintroduce themselves and say a bit about what’s most important to them and then together to complete the following open sentences:
  » What holds us back (from stepping into what’s important) is…
  » The resources we already have to begin are…
  » The support we need is…
  » The commitments we are ready to make are…

There is a particular energy to having this about “us” and “we” rather than “me.” Completing these sentences in the plural helps people realize that we have a great deal in common with each other. Likewise, the declarative energy of open sentences, which is different than the inquiry of questions, is powerful. It calls for a standing up and stepping forward energy. Declaring rather than inquiring invites us to bring forward what we already know and already have.

And in all cases, the focus is on right here, right now. Us, together.

From this experience, people usually say that they now see that:

• The things that hold them back are not as big as they fear.
• They already do know where to begin.
• They need each other.
• What is missing is their own commitment to step into what’s important now.

These are often powerful realizations.

Ideally a NOWCast is followed by a ProAction Café or some other method where participants invite others to join them in a session on something they are passionate about, something they feel called to do. And then get more and more specific about next steps to take, together.
Creating Good BA

All of the processes described in this chapter are ways to create a generative BA. While I have given you a lot of detailed directions, the simple message is: create good BA. Create the conditions that support people in being curious, in being respectful, in really listening to each other and caring about each other.

Above all, don’t get too preoccupied with methodologies.

Remember that each of these methods are just useful tools. They can be helpful and important. But do not let them distract you from noticing what is going on in the room. Pay attention to the energy, the excitement, the sadness. Notice when the room comes alive and notice when it goes dead. Notice when you, yourself, start to get anxious. What are you sensing? What’s going on inside you that can provide valuable insights about what is going on in the room?

Don’t be afraid to step in and ask yourself and others on your team, what’s going on here? Quiet yourself for a moment, pull someone off to the side and talk with them about what you are sensing.

And of course, all the time, remember to have fun. We are doing serious and important work. It is essential that we enjoy it.

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Explore the book AfterNow: When We Cannot See the Future, Where Do We Begin? at www.AfterNow.Tod