

Why Hosting Is Harder than Leading



Peter Pula is seen here hosting a recent event for the Peterborough Dialogues, an Axiom News initiative.

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Monday, December 19, 2016 -- Peter Pula

We have become so remarkably accustomed to a form of leadership that comes from the top. Why? Well, because it is easier for everybody. It is easier for the leader because they can indulge in their narcissism. And, well, we want them to. You see, if they are shaping things according to their filters and persona then we can move in a direction that is embodied by the leader. It is easy to grasp. The leader can also be in full knowing that they need to have a thick skin. They prep up for it. Then all too

often we oblige their defensive energies by hammering away at the thick skin. They take responsibility for the whole. We let them and pay them well for it. Their remarkable and disproportionate pay and power grade gives us permission to either grumble or acquiesce. The possibility of communal co-dependency and the shadow side of top-down leadership is very high.

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So the boundary conditions of this kind of leader-follower relationship are simple and clear and everybody plays. And guess what, the dominant energetic pattern is one of separating. We externalize, intellectualize, and dissociate. We simplify and alienate. Then we wonder why we are consuming the planet trying to fill all the gaps in our souls and in our relationships.

Hosting the space for generativity is a different game entirely. Watch out. It is dangerous. Life is dangerous. Good but not tame. Deep, deep democracy is at work.

Holding space for life, for what wants to emerge from the gifts of the people around you, starts with acknowledging you are a limited perceiver. Then, I believe, the best hosts must come into the spaces they host ready to be changed personally, to learn, and to be surprised. To be open to the unfolding of life and be its good and willing servant and shepherd are the way to host a truly generative field. If, like me, you believe that nothing changes until those gathered drop into their truest intentions

and purposes and come into presence with one another, you will guide the room to connect. You will offer those gathered the opportunity to see and be seen by one another in as sacred, open, and loving way possible.

A couple of the needs I most often witness in my hosting work are loneliness and isolation. It is mindboggling how pervasive and powerful this is.

I was recently in a conversation with a host who shared with me that what three years ago would have taken a group a few days to achieve in terms of connection and resonance, we now seem able to achieve within 20-30 minutes. It's true. We know how now and there seems to be more collective readiness for it.

So, we invite people to connect and it happens, quickly. The depth of connection people can experience so quickly often starkly contrasts the loneliness they are accustomed to feeling. In touching those nerves, all kinds of things happen.

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It is not uncommon for all kinds of emotions to be unleashed. Powerful and profound experiences of all sorts come to life at once. Some people feel seen for the first time in their lives. Others come to tears before saying a word at the mere prospect that two other people are waiting with openness and attentiveness to hear from them and what is in their soul. Many experience a sense of love and longing ... in the company of perfect strangers.

As things unfold others become uncomfortable with the emergence. Their need, legitimate need, for a sense of predictability and action, is confronted by the blossoming life and creativity in the room. Sometimes, as fear and scarcity fall off, the power to compel others in a 'sure' direction dissipates. 'Waiting for it' can be extremely challenging, like the ground underneath is gone.

As a host, or hosting team, you could very well find yourself overwhelmed by projections, transferences, shadows. Are you able to parse what is yours and what is someone else's? Are you able to stay 'still in disturbance' when you have unleashed life on an unsuspecting routine? Are you able to hold your centre, process what is coming up for you, and still, still, transcend that to sense how to best host the room and respond to its needs first? Can you embody peace, trust, and non-attachment? Can you watch as some leave, separate, check out? Will you be okay? Can you stay 'soft' and out of leader-centric narcissism, its highs and lows, its doubts and certainties? Can you tenderly hold what is being born?

Top down leadership seems easier in the short term, but I believe it takes its toll. Too many leaders I have seen are in despair, prisoners of their own institutions, without the power to give life but only to take it away or at best hold the line. Alone, too often alone.

A different kind of leadership, participatory, serving as a host and cultivator of the conditions for transformative community change can be an incredibly wholing experience. I have come to see it as a spiritual practice. Rather than bouncing things off your thick skin you bring them in, sense and experience them fully, integrate, process, be responsive, then let go. It seems so much more personal and intimate. It is harder. And yet, in the times to come it will be necessary if we are, as a species, to learn how to serve life itself.

I was there when a wise man I know suggested this:
Given the urgency of the crisis in which we find ourselves we have no time to be anything other than gentle.

Comments

Submitted by Todd Barr (not verified) on Wed, 12/21/2016 - 21:25

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Thanks for being courageous

Thanks for being courageous enough to share these thoughts Peter. I recently read a piece where the author spoke about having the courage to care for one another. To truly care, the author suggests, often means to be silent and simply present when all convention fades away, obviously useless in the face of a wicked, or perhaps unsolvable problem like facing death with a life-threatening illness. Together to let creativity (and life?) emerge. The challenge is that courage is the opposite of cozy. Other opposites of cozy include the dark and difficult things that life throws at us...things we wouldn't wish for upon anyone yet there they are...and often impervious to any moral philosophising about how life is sacred and precious etc. when so often it feels like a crap sandwich. Perhaps the role of host is to create space for exploration of questions of the heart. Is life a mystery? Is it a foregone conclusion? Did this inquiry include any fellow travellers? We are all in this together after all. As for the hierarchy of organizations and the importance spotlight we shine on them...to solve all our problems for us...to provide us with answers...have we abdicated our responsibilities? Let the hosted conversation begin...

- [Reply](#)

Submitted by Todd Barr (not verified) on Wed, 12/21/2016 - 21:52

In reply to [Thanks for being courageous](#) by Todd Barr (not verified)

[Permalink](#)

If the sacred act is to care

If the sacred act is to care for, and about one another...then perhaps this is the challenge for leaders as hosts. To have the courage to be vulnerable enough to not know in the face of the unknowable. In the face of a situation that demands a new creativity of two or more people. A creativity that cannot be predicted until we stop

the usual and wait. We can do this.

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Submitted by Kathy Kessler (not verified) on Tue, 01/17/2017 - 09:54

[Permalink](#)

This journey is for all

Thanks for what you've brought forth Peter. This sentence jumped at me: It is easier for the leader because they can indulge in their narcissism. Undoubtedly there are leaders feeding their narcissism through their roles. I suggest they are the minority. My experience is that many are navigating life to the best of their wiring/capabilities/knowledge; some surprised at where they find themselves. Conscious and unconscious motivators and circumstances have led them to the present; struggling under outdated and somewhat meaningless metrics within broken institutions. Let us also take some responsibility for current leaders. Raised in a culture of looking outside ourselves for answers, we've placed people on pedestals – a move that serves no one. This journey is for all of us. I look forward to a world where we deepen our understanding of who and what we are; where more step forward as leaders; where hosting becomes a natural part of leading.

- [Reply](#)

Submitted by Priya Mahtani (not verified) on Wed, 12/16/2020 - 11:38

[Permalink](#)

Emergence

Hello Peter,

I'm new to the world of hosting and emergence, although resonate deeply with every word you've shared. I've recently been uplevelling my own competencies and started to "host" a few gatherings myself, although very much at the beginnings and

I know I have a lot to learn. I'm especially interested in how to "best host the room and respond to its needs first." Sometimes in my very limited experience, I'm the one who checks out, so I guess some of my own inner work is to learn to stay grounded and present, no matter what else is going on in the room! I suspect that is more around projecting a false idea of who I think I need to be in the space in the first place, rather than just trusting my own intuitive knowing.

As everything is evolving in real-time, of course the next moment can be rich, creative and full of awe, but navigating the inner feeling of flow, stopping and starting and awkwardness is a real thing!

My heart says that hosting is the way forwards for humanity. I've never liked the hierarchical top-down approach of leadership and feel that true leadership works best when it's in service to the good of the whole, whatever the structure. (Could just be that I don't like being "told!" lol).

I've lived in community in Auroville, South India and worked in non-hierarchical structures there and here in the UK in Steiner Waldorf communities, although hidden hierarchies in both did exist - which were arguably as corrosive as some more overt ones. I wonder if there's such a thing as a "hosting supervision camp" where those interested in deepening skills can come meet and share with others too.

I have this feeling that weaving together with others in meta containers can only better help support and inform our own practice. I am certainly strengthened by the many groups I'm currently part of - but I guess I was wondering what might be available specifically for hosting.

Grateful to be in contact with you and your work and the clarity and wisdom you have to share. The wise man who said "... we have not time to be anything other than gentle..." was wise indeed and a timely reminder for me to be gentle with my self in the process.

- [Reply](#)