

The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters

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Introduction:

The 2015 *State of Enterprise Work* survey found that “wasteful meetings” were employees’ top obstacle to getting work done.

Chapter 1: Decide Why You’re *Really* Gathering

If I were to ask what was the purpose behind each of those gatherings, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear what I asked to do in my work: what you were supposed to *do* at the gathering.

When we don’t examine the deeper assumptions behind *why* we gather, we end up skipping too quickly to replicating old, staid formats of gathering. And we forgo the possibility of creating something memorable, even transformative.

After proceeding itself, Calabrese behaves more like a strict, caring uncle than a traditional judge. He verifies the details of the case and checks errors in front of the defendants. He takes the time to address each individual personally, often shaking their hand as they approach the bench. He explained their situation to them carefully: “the fine print says if you don’t come through, they will come and evict you, and no one wants to see that happen, so I’ve written ‘12\30’ in big numbers on the top of the page.” You have a sense that the people here are rooting for defendants and litigants to get their lives in order. It’s not uncommon for Calabrese to pray as a defendant who has shown progress. “Obviously this is a good result for you. It’s also a great result for the community, and I’d like to give you a round of applause,” he might say. And then you see everyone, even the police officers, applauding.

Thanks to ancient traditions and modern Pinterest boards, it’s easy to overlook the step of choosing a vivid purpose for your personal gathering. Just as many of us assume we know what a trial is for, so we think we know what a birthday party is for, or what a wedding is for, or even what a dinner party is for. And so our personal gatherings tend not to serve the purposes that they could. When you skip asking yourself what the purpose of your birthday party is in *this* specific year, for where you are at this present moment in your life....

Specificity is a crucial ingredient. The more focused and particular a gathering is, the more narrowly it frames itself and the more passion it arouses.

The company has helped millions of people gather. When its founders began to study what made for a successful group, a surprising observation came to light. It wasn’t always the big-tent groups, bringing everything to everyone, that most attracted people. It was often the groups that were narrower and more specific. “The more specific the Meetup, the more likelihood for success,” Scott Heiferman, its founder and CEO, told me.

This modesty is related to a desire not to seem like you care too much — I desire to project the appearance of being chill, cool, and relaxed about your gathering. Gathering well isn’t a chill activity. If you want to chill, visit the Arctic. But modesty can also derive from the idea that people don’t want to be imposed on. This hesitancy, which permeates many gatherings, doesn’t consider that you may be doing your guests a favor by having a focus.

Chapter 2: Close Doors

The crux of excluding thoughtfully and intentionally is mastering the courage to keep away your Bobs. It is to shift your perception so that you understand that people who are fulfilling the purpose of your gathering *are* detracting from it, even if they do nothing to detract from it. This is because once they are actually in your presence you (and your and other considerate guests) will want to welcome and include them, which takes time and attention away from what (and who) you’re actually there for. Particularly in smaller gatherings, every single person affects the dynamics of the group. Excluding well and purposefully is reframing who and what you are being generous to — your guests and your purpose. [note : BM]

As part of her job, Woon teaches a course for graduate students who aspire to become museum educators. It takes place in a classroom within the museum. On the first day of class, at 3 PM sharp, the classroom door opens. In the

middle of the room is a huge mess of white chairs, all tangled together – a giant highway pileup of seating. His paws, confused. They look around at one another and then at Woon. Their teacher watches quietly, giving away nothing. Eventually the students begin talking to one another. Little by little, their confidence growing, their interactions becoming more amusing by the minute, they untangle the chairs and arrange them. As they do so, each student must decide what to do with his or her chair without instructions: Where should I put my chair? How close should the chair be to someone else's? Are we forming rows? A circle? If someone is not going along with the group shape, what should we do?

This is what I mean when I say that Catherine well doesn't require money or fish lives. It doesn't require a fancy venue. The classroom that Woon uses is utterly ordinary — an unremarkable space in a building, and a city, full of remarkable spaces. By doing one simple thing — setting up the chairs in that crazy tangle — Woon makes the place an embodiment of her purpose. What was that purpose? To teach these future museum educators that nothing in a museum is sacred – not even a pile of chairs that at MOMA could've been confused for a work of art. And to teach them that art truly happens with people participate in it, and that a museum comes to life when people interact with it. “The reason I do this is to challenge traditional hierarchies of teaching and learning. The design of social space, physical space, and emotional space affects how people engage with ideas, content, and each other. And I wanted to show my students that you must actually design a ‘space’ for exchange and also then invite participation by design,” she explains. Over the course of the ensuing weeks, she teaches these aspiring museum educators how to make such interactions happen — how to achieve the kind of participatory museum she believes in and fights to defend. But on that first day, at zero cost and to unforgettable affect, she embodies all that she wished to say.

If the purpose is to get your company out of the rut of old ideas and thinking, the opposite may be true. What many hosts don't realize is that the choice of venue is one of your most powerful levers over your guests' behavior. The deft gatherer picks a place that elicits the behavior she wants and plays down the behavior she doesn't.

A dinner party is not supposed to take place in an ocean. Which is why Fermor went there. And which is why you should think about where your next gathering ought *not* take place, and hold it there.

To ensure people will remember the distinct parts of your party, Ed Cooke, an expert on the workings of memory, suggest having several interesting phases over the course of the evening, each of which occurs in a different space. “That way, in your recollection, the focus of conversation doesn't all kind of blur into itself, and become just a single ‘it was fun,’ but instead you can remember specific things that happened at each point. You go on a journey; there's a narrative,” he said.

Even though it would create more intimacy if we did. So next time you're in a gathering venue, remember that something as simple as a few flip charts can allow you to transform the feel of a room.

Table of Example (Density)

Square feet per guest	Sophisticated	Lively	hot
Dinner party	20 sq feet	15 sq feet	n/a
Cocktail party	12 sq feet	10 sq feet	8 sq feet
Into the night dance party	8 sq feet	6 sq feet	5 sq feet

He suggests dividing the “square feet of your party space by the number to get your target number of guests.” If you're entertaining space is 400 sq feet and you want a sophisticated dinner party, invite 20 people. If instead you want a “hot” dance party, invite 80 people for that same space. Mac says one of the reasons party guests often end up gravitating to the kitchen is that people instinctively seek out smaller spaces as the group dwindles in order to sustain the level of the density.

Chapter 3: Don't Be a Chill Host

“Chill” is selfishness disguised as kindness

a game of Werewolf [circled with question mark]

The popcorn of conversation goes on for what seems like an eternity but is really about five minutes. Eventually,

Heifetz looks up at the class and, to everyone's great relief, says, "Welcome to Adaptive Leadership." What is Heifetz doing? Launching a course on leadership by showing students what happens when you abdicate leadership. You don't eradicate power. You just hand the opportunity to take charge to someone else – in this case, the students. You are not easing their way or setting them free. You are pumping them full of confusion and anxiety.

If you are going to create a kingdom for an hour or a day, rule it –and rule it with generosity.

Chapter 4: Create a Temporary Alternative World

Etiquette allows people to gather because they are the same. Pop-up rules allow people to gather because they are different—yet open to having the same experience.

You just need to be told tonight's rules.

When they knew that was the deal, they became more relaxed. They couldn't micro-coordinate. They were giving up the option of finding a better option. They were just here. And because we were all here, we enjoyed one another's company to the fullest.

We discovered from these experiments that spending 12 hours together as a group is fundamentally different from spending four hours together on three separate occasions. The longer you're together, the more reality sets in. You can only chitchat for so long. People including you get tired and cranky; walls start to come down. By the time late afternoon arrives, people begin sharing stories of their pasts, of their struggles with money, parents, religion — topics that don't always come up easily. And it was these conversations that truly mattered and made me feel less alone. I realize that there were others in the city who had left the homes they knew in pursuit of adventure but who, like me, treasured their families. That there were others who experienced setbacks in their work and wanted to talk about them...

It's rare for groups of people to do things together for a sustained amount of time. We all carry with us the technical capacity to be anywhere, to check out of the present time or space. That means we always could be doing anything. So the active choice to do ONE thing and to do it with a fixed set of people is significant. I sometimes find myself feeling antsy with the rules. I wanted to text someone or look up information or just flip through Instagram because Instagram trained me to treat unfilled time as an opportunity to browse Instagram.

What "I am here" day offered was a different way to fill that time. Because of the rules, I could go deeper into the experience. I could observe something around me my phone would have caused me to miss. I could interact with the person next to me instead of thousands of miles away. And with the knowledge that I would spend an entire day with this one group, I could let go of the low-level anxiety caused by using every moment to anticipate the next. It didn't matter what else was going on. It didn't concern me where I had to be next. Because I decided to be **HERE**.

Chapter 5 : Never Start a Funeral with Logistics

Before your event starts, it has begun

Your gathering begins at the moment your guests first learn of it. This may sound obvious, but it's not.

the moment of discovery. The intentional gatherer begins to host not from the formal start of the event but from that moment of discovery.

Four months after he got engaged, Felix Barrett, a prominent London-based theater director, received a key in the mail in an envelope marked "To be continued." He heard no nothing else for months. "It was blissful torture," he later said, "the whole world suddenly took on a heightened hyper real feeling, and everything was shrouded in mystery."

Barrett was no stranger to mysterious experiences, but he was used to being in the driver's seat when they happened. The artistic director of Punchdrunk, an immersive theater company in Britain, Barrett has shaken up his field with his staging of daring interactive plays. His New York City version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, titled *Sleep No More*, your belongings are taken from me at the entrance, you are separated from your party, and you are given a white mask to wear for the duration of the show, a shot of liquor, and an invitation to explore five floors of been abandoned

warehouse in Chelsea.

Now the tables were turned on Barrett. After that first envelope arrived, he waited. Eventually, another letter arrived: “Now we can begin.” A suitcase was delivered to him at work. Inside, he later told *the New York Times*, he found a tide table, map coordinates and a small shovel. He followed the coordinates and found himself on the banks of the river Thames. There, he dug up a box full of photographs of words on a computer screen. Those photographs told him that if he completed a series of challenges, he would be welcomed into a secret society.

For weeks, he would receive bizarre prompts from odd messengers: strangers, the words on a cat collar, letters in remote vacation spots. Each prompt included some kind of challenge that he would have to complete were he to enter the secret society. Barrett being Barrett, he obliged. He found himself doing half marathons and climbing between boats on ropes. Each individual challenge presumably took him one step closer to that secret society. Then suddenly one day he was blindfolded, kidnapped and taken to an old manor house where he was greeted by thirty hooded men in robes. They were his best friends. He was at the bachelor party of a lifetime—his own. And understood two things well in organizing his bachelor party. First, that a gathering starts long before guests walk through the door. The clock of the gathering starts, so to speak, from the moment I guess becomes aware of its existence. For Barrett, at the moment he received the key in the envelope, his journey into the gathering had begun. And from that moment on word, his friends knew that they were hosting Barrett all the way to the actual gathering. And that how they hosted him would shape how he showed up to the gathering.

A colleague in the conflict-resolution field taught me a principal I have never forgotten: 90% of what makes a gathering successful is put in place beforehand.

One of those lessons have to do with the scale of the ask and the scale of the preparation. The bigger the ask — say, if you’re having people travel long distances to attend your gathering – the more care, attention, and detail should be put into the pregame face. You need to attend to your guests in this pregame window in proportion to the risk and effort you are demanding of them.

One other lesson is that, whether in Middle East peace talks or at weekend dance parties, every gathering benefits or suffers from the expectations and spirit with which guests show up. It’s hard to get a dance party started, for example, when people show up subdued and in the mood for a quiet conversation. Similarly, if you’re hosting a meeting at work and hoping to have an honest conversation in which employees share what they’re actually experiencing, it can be harder to do if they show up cynical or defensive. Sure, you can try to change their mood when they arrive. But it takes more energy and sophistication on the part of the host and cut into the time for the gathering. It is preferable to pregame.

Priming can be as simple as a slightly interesting invitation, as straightforward as asking your guest to *do* something instead of *bring* something.

He dashed off a quick email to his guests asking them to send him two photographs of happy moments they’d had in the past year.

When the guests walked in the door that evening, they found a Christmas tree decorated with 24 printed photographs, cut into small circles, of their own joyous moments: scuba diving, standing in front of the house bearing a “sold” sign, wearing acrobat gear before a performance. They had a cocktail around the tree, marveling at one another’s moments. “Suddenly they were not strangers, or colleagues, but the personal part was there, and that started the dinner so well,” Laprise recalled.

Laprise understood what many of us miss : asking guest to contribute to a gathering ahead of time changes their perception of it. Many of us have no trouble asking guests to bring a bottle of wine or a side dish, but rarely do we consider what else we might demand of them in advance.

She needed to get through a on a brand new, fully loaded loaner Kindle. The Kindle was still a relatively new product, and I don’t know that my boss had ever handled one. This boss, who received hundreds of pieces of mail and thousands of emails a week and frequently didn’t leave the office until after 10 PM, had, even before signing up

for this conference, more backlogged reading to do than she cared to think about. But when that package arrived, with yet more reading to add to her backlog, she looked at the Kindle and smiled. Yes, the organizers were asking her to fulfill her part of the bargain to do the readings. But through the small design choice to send it on the loaner Kindle, they were able to capture an incredibly busy woman's attention and signal, "this one is going to be different."

One way to help people leave their other worlds and enter yours is to walk them through a passage way, physical or metaphorical.

Third Rail Projects is a New York-based theater company that specializes in this. I attended two of its shows to learn how it whisks guests into alternative universes so quickly. And at least in the two that I attended, *The Grand Paradise* and *Then She Fell* the directors created literal passageways for their audience

The actual show, in our minds, hasn't yet begun. But the creators understand that they have an interest in shaping your total experience, and they understand that things have often begun before they have formally started. With that same understanding, one of the best-known performance artists alive, Marina Abramovic, has created a replicable methodology that she uses to transition her audiences from the outside world into her shows.

Performance art is defined by the Museum of Modern Art as a live event in which "the artist's medium is the body, and the live actions he or she performs are the work of art." This art form, even more than others, is interested in the relationship between the audience and the artist.

Over the years, Abramovic has developed the so-called Abramovic Method of Music, which includes a way of preparing her guests for these performances. When audience members arrive, they are asked to put all their belongings (including their cellphones) into a locker before entering the venue. Then they sit in a chair silently, wearing noise-cancelling headphones for thirty minutes to block out all the distractions that keep us from being truly present. She thinks of this time as a palate cleanser. "The silence is something that prepares them for their experience," she told me.

When I asked Abramovic about these passageways she creates, she said simply, "I want to take them from their comfort zone and into a new experience." And she realizes that people are more open to new experiences when the old is cleared away and some space is carved out for the new.

Attention is at its highest at the outset. Because of what scientists call "cognitive processing constraints," we're not able to remember every minute of an experience. Our brain effectively chooses for us what we will remember later. Studies show that audiences disproportionately remember the first 5%, the last 5%, and the climactic moment of a talk.

Because we think the moments before we start somehow don't matter, any number of gatherings began with throat clearing. Conferences that commence this way: "before we start there's a white Camaro with its lights on in the parking lot, license plate TXW4628." Townhalls that begin with announcements. Galas, full of people dressed in their finery, that launch with a long list of thank you's to the event sponsors. I'm speaking, in short, of every gathering whose opening moments are governed by the thought: "let's first get some business out of the way." It may seem like I'm nitpicking, but what I'm proposing couldn't be more vital to the work of gathering better.

If you need some inspiration to push back against those sponsors, consider the case of George Lucas. When he was filming the original *Star Wars*, he wanted a bold launch for his movie. The Directors Guild of America protested. Most films at the time started by naming the writer and director in the opening title sequence—in this case, thanking the film's creators rather than its sponsors. It was how things were done. Despite the protest of the directors guild, Lucas decided to forgo opening credits entirely. The result was one of the most memorable beginnings in movie history. And he paid for it—the Director's Guild fined him \$250,000 for his daring. His loyalty was to his audience's experience, and he was willing to sacrifice for it. You should be, too.

Before anyone gets a bite of his preparations, he raises two bloody Fiorentina steaks above his head, thundering, "To

beef, or not to beef!”

There are many ways to accomplish this honoring and all in. I want had a teacher named Sugata Roychowdhury, who, on the first day of accounting class, took attendance in a legendary way. Instead of lowering his head over a checklist and droning out names, he walked around the room, holding eye contact with the 70 or so new students in the lecture hall, and, one by one, pointed at each student and stated their (sometimes quite complicated) first and last names. They had never laid eyes on him before, North event. He took the entire classes attendance from memory. We were mesmerized. He must’ve studied our photos and practiced our names for hours ahead of time. This is an example of taking a totally banal element of gathering –roll call—and with a few hours of effort transforming it into a dramatic opening.

Each guest arrived, Thurston would start clapping and yelling “*Atencion Atencion!*” All the other guests would turn and look as he playfully yelled, “Announcing... Katie Stewart!” He then went on to tell the room a few details about Katie that others might be interested in: “I first met Katie at a surfing class, where it turns out she was the best surfer in the class. Katie moved to New York three years ago from a job in Kenya. She is a neighbor –go, Brooklyn!—and has two pugs. My favorite thing about Katie is that, despite having a crazy job, whenever I call her, she picks up.” The other guests would burst into applause after each introduction. It was a bit of a shtick, but the introductions were funny, insightful, and unexpected, and Thurston owned it, so everyone went along.

In 30 seconds, he built each guest up while giving everyone in the room three or four pieces of interesting grist to connect to. He didn’t reduce anyone to their profession. He believes some mystery (*I wonder what that crazy job is*). He did it for each guest and each guest looked at once embarrassed, thrown off guard, and pleased.

If someone asks Perel a question about cheating or divorce or boredom, before answering it, she’ll look out at the audience and ask, “how many of you can relate to this question?” Or, “who also wonders about this?” In that simple act, she transforms a one-to-many speech into a collective experience.

He takes a ball of string and throws it to a student, saying something nice to her. And then the child continues to practice, holding her part of the string and throwing the ball to another student and sings another nice thing, and so on, until the group has built a spiderweb of string. “If I tug my end of the web, everyone else feels it move, and that’s what a community is,” Barrett tells them. “All of your choices, all of your actions, large or small, will affect everybody else.”

Barrett has found a creative, age-appropriate way to remind his students –his guests-- why they’re doing what they’re doing. A thoughtful opening moment like that can change the course of a gathering—even one whose duration is measured in years.

Chapter 6 : Keep Your Best Self Out Of My Gathering

I had been invited that year to join the WEF Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership.

Then came the clincher: what if we made the last person sing their toast? I laughed when my husband proposed this, but he was serious. It would set a brisk pace for the evening and add some nice risk.

We explain the rules, including the singing rule and the Chatham House rule (borrowed from the Royal Institute of International Affairs) that we had adopted, which allows people to talk about their experience of a private meeting and share the stories that emerge, but forbids specific attributions to any of the participants.

She then danced all over the house celebrating. I learned that day, from her reaction, that being a woman with something to be celebrated. But she didn’t stop there. Two weeks later, my mother threw me a period party.

One of these more forward thinking gatherings is called House of Genius. You may recall encountering it briefly in the chapter on pop up the rules...

In lieu of food, at each setting was a Zeldin invention called the “Conversation Menu” that led the pairs through six “courses” of talk. Under the heading of “Starters” were questions like “How have your priorities changed over the years?” and “How have your background and experience limited or favored you?” Under “Soups” was an invitation to ask “Which parts of your life have been a waste of time?” Under “Fish” : “What have you rebelled against in the past and what are you rebelling against now?” Under “Salads” : “What are the limits of your compassion?”

Borrowing from my CAN group’s use of “crucible moments,” we asked the group to share a story, a moment, or an experience from their life that “changed the way you view the world.” Then we added the clincher: it had to be a story that no one else at the gathering knew. This was, in a sense, a rather wild requirement for a gathering of family members in a tightknit society in which relatives are a bigger part of life than friends. But we thought it might give the dinner a shot at getting people who thought they knew everything about one another to see one another with fresh eyes.

Chapter 7 : Cause Good Controversy

This is what the organization DoSomething.org does when it hosts its annual Social Good cage fight. (Promotional poster: watch industry leaders duke it out on some of the sauciest topics in the nonprofit sector like: One organization can’t claim to own an entire movement— Volunteering abroad perpetuates the white savior complex— Social Media campaigns are just another form of slacktivism— ‘Raising Awareness’ doesn't do sh*t.”)

To do this, I began the day by setting ground rules. I asked the following question: what do you need to feel safe here?

In the course of researching this book, I met a woman named Ida Benedetto who create secret, underground gatherings that help guests safely take risks they wouldn’t normally take. Benedetto and her partner N. D. Austin are self-described “transgression consultants” and cofounders of a design practice called Sextantworks. We’re behind gatherings like the night heron: a New York speakeasy house illegally and a water tower. Benedetto and Austin are also the creators of a fake conference called the Timothy convention, and annual, flash-mob-like gathering at the iconic Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York.

Chapter 8 : Accept That There Is An End

I once had an improv teacher, Dave Sawyer, who told us that you can tell the difference between good actors and great ones not by how they enter a stage, which every actor thinks about and plans for, but how they exit. Good actors enter dramatically and in character, say their lines, and when they’re done, assuming their job is finished, scuttle off the stage. Great actor spend as much time thinking about the parting. Great host, too. Because great hosts, like great actors, understand that how end things, like how you begin them, shapes people’s experience, sense of meaning, and memory.

“How do you allow them to welcome everything and push away nothing?”

When done well, openings and closings often mirror one another. Just as before your opening there should be a period of ushering, so if closings there is a need to prepare people for the end. This is not ushering so much as last call.

In drinking establishments around the world, bartenders loudly announce last call. Why? To prepare you for the end of your time in that place. To allow you to resolve whatever unfinished business you may have at that bar — be that settling the tab or ordering a final drink or asking that man for his number. The announcement of last call unites the gathering of the bar around the knowledge of the night’s finitude. I believe many gatherings — and homes in workplaces and beyond — could benefit from adopting the idea behind issuing the last car.

A strong closing has two phases, corresponding to two distinct needs among your guests: looking inward and turning outward. Looking inward is about taking a moment to understand, remember, acknowledge, and reflect on what just transpired—and to bond as a group one last time. Turning outward is about preparing to part from one another and retake your place in the world.

The answer is a special closing session called “if these were my last remarks.” The session features approximately

20 participants, each of whom is given two minutes to tell the group what they would say if this was the end of their life. People read poems, share stories about their faith, confess doubts, recall tragedies large and small. “It’s motivating, it’s touching, it’s tragic...”

Party favors are a common, if mundane, version of the bridge, though because they’ve become part of “what you do,” they often don’t have the same effect. They represent, therefore, a ripe opportunity for rethinking and refreshing. The next time you have the chance to distribute party favors, whether for a child’s birthday or something more unusual, like a work event, ask yourself: how can I use this gift to turn an impermanent moment into a permanent memory? I once had a client give me a piece of a recycled shipping container after a particularly intense meeting I facilitated for her in Detroit. The meeting had been about her dream of starting a hotel in a deserted part of town to attract investment and reanimate the area, while highlighting the stories of the people who grew up in Detroit. This scrap set on my desk for many years as a reminder of the hope for rebuilding a city.

“I advise them not to wait till it becomes a crisis before committing to living a balanced life,” he told me.

“Recognizing that you cannot balance your life at every moment, I urge them to think of immediate priorities so that over an arc of 18 to 24 months, their life seems to be balanced and under control,” he said. Then he performs a card trick, and at the end of the trick he says to his students that while it looks like magic, it is just technique, and that he hopes for them to master the techniques in his course until they look like magic. He then reads a poem by the Irish poet John O’Donohue, “For A New Beginning,” urging his students to “Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning.” Finally, he ends the way the class began, by asking the students to close in a minute of silence.

All this for a consulting class? I had heard from him that, year after year, the students are really moved, with the class often ending in tears. (He also regularly wins teaching awards.) I asked him why he spent his final class in this way. He said the sendoff was not only to remind his students of their purpose together in the class, but to remind himself of his own purpose as a teacher as well.