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Helping Self-Organized  
 Work Groups  
**WORK**

Lisa Kimball, Group Jazz  
<http://www.groupjazz.com>  
 +1 202.686.4848

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We find ourselves working more and more with diverse groups of people from different roles and places in the organization who come together to get something done. Sometimes, these groups are self-organized meaning that people have self-selected to participate because they are interested in a topic, concerned about a problem, or intrigued with a possibility ....

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FROM	TO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fixed work group membership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>shifting work group membership</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>all work group members drawn from within one organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work group members can include people from outside the organization and from multiple organizations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work group members are dedicated 100% to the work group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>most people divide their time among multiple work groups</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work group members are co-located organizationally and functionally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work group members are distributed organizationally and across functions</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work groups have a fixed starting and ending point</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work groups form and reform continuously</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work groups are managed by a single manager</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work groups have multiple reporting relationships with different parts of the organization at different times and/or may be self-managing</li> </ul>

These are some of the shifts that we notice in how work is done in many organizations.

Sometimes when self-organized work groups run into challenges, the “blame” is put on the fact that they were self-organizing .... but it’s often some of these other factors that make it hard to stay aligned and energized.

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The challenge is to create a pattern of relationships and ways of working together where the whole is MORE than the sum of the parts. The WHOLE is something that couldn't be as fabulous as it is without the contribution of each of the individual pieces – the different sizes, colors, materials .... Just like the different roles, experience, skills, and ideas of all the individuals who make up a work group.

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Relationship Building	Divergent Conversation	Convergent Conversation	Sustaining Action
Lubricating and sustaining the ability to be productive and constructive	Getting everyone's thinking and ideas out	Distilling and summarizing the ideas and information generated to determine what is important and what direction to pursue	Implementing the decisions made and ensuring performance over time

There are many different kinds of activities that self-organized work groups must engage in to be effective.

It's important to have strategies to support the full array of activities important to helping self-organized work groups sustain productive action.

Many groups get off the mark strong with some great brainstorming of ideas and possibilities. But they sometimes struggle to focus on a few selected ideas/tasks and find ways to keep up the momentum after the initial excitement fades.

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Five Ways to Support  
Self-organized Work Groups

- Make the **WHOLE** visible to everyone
- Create **LINES OF SIGHT** to every part of the system
- Leave **TRACKS & FOOTPRINTS** everywhere
- Catalyze rich **CONVERSATIONS**
- Amplify **ENERGY**

We've discovered five strategies that can make a difference in how well self-organized groups work over time.

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Make the **WHOLE**  
visible to everyone



People get more engaged when they have a sense of the whole in which they are a part.

Even if (especially when) a project is only a small piece of a larger system, it's important to find ways of connecting that piece to the whole.

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It helps members of groups contribute effectively when they can see how they "fit" in the whole. See the unique and special contribution that they can make. Feel that the whole would be less if they were missing. (and, of course, also appreciate how that is true for every other member of the group)

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One tactic that can help members “see” themselves (literally) as part of a group is to take a group picture and make sure everyone has one or that it is visible on a bulletin board or other common place where the group (and other people) will see it from time to time and be reminded that the group exists and who is in it.

For some reason, it’s a psychologically different experience to see yourself as part of a group picture than it is to see your name on a list. Seeing bits of chart paper reports or other artifacts is also a good trigger to remind group members of the fun conversation they had and all the good ideas that emerged.

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Sometimes, a group doesn’t have an opportunity to take a picture at the beginning ... and new members join over time.

Thanks to the wonders of digital photography it’s possible to create a group picture by stitching together individual pics and grouping them so that you still get the effect of seeing yourself in the context of a group.

Even better, putting pictures in a circle to evoke the feeling of sitting in a circle together provides an affective experience that reinforces a sense of the group conversation.



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Find ways to send and receive “reports” about meetings and other activities that take place for particular groups. These accounts aren’t like detailed court reporting or transcripts or even the usual meeting minutes. They should be more like journalistic reports – tell the stories, provide the affective feel of what happened. What was the buzz? What were people excited about? Concerned about? Who made an impression? What happened that was funny or fun?

Even if you are just working on an internal project – it can be fun to create newsletters with pictures and stories that help everyone feel included even if they are far away or working on a small piece of the puzzle.

Spice things up by using video and audio media. How about a podcast? What about inviting people to bring in their digital video camera (you know, the one they have to take pictures of their grandchildren) and do a little on-the-spot story about what’s going on in their part of the organization so others can see and feel it.

Provide “maps” of the network ... ;put pins on a map or an org chart so you can have the fun of seeing where everyone is working ...

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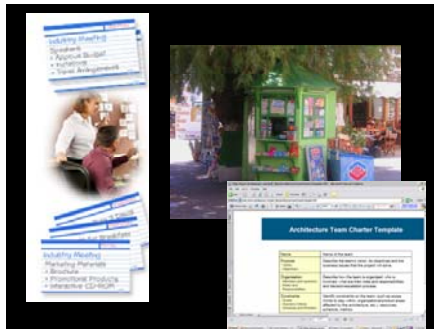


Sometimes the coordinator or coordinating team of a project with self-organized work groups has regular meetings or check-ins with key leaders or sponsors. They get a sense of what the leadership is thinking/feeling about the project .. What's important? What's causing concern or excitement?

But the rest of the group is left out. It's critical to find ways for everyone to have a line of sight to the leadership and for the leadership to have lines of sight out to the far reaches of the project. This is especially true when there are self-organized groups because they often lack the natural opportunities of events like division meetings.

Invite leaders to attend small group meetings occasionally. Find people from all over the system who can take a turn going to brief leadership on what's happening. Share those newsletters and other reports with leaders so they hear the stories.

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Find ways for people both inside and outside the project to find out who is doing what and learn how they can get connected with something that interests them.

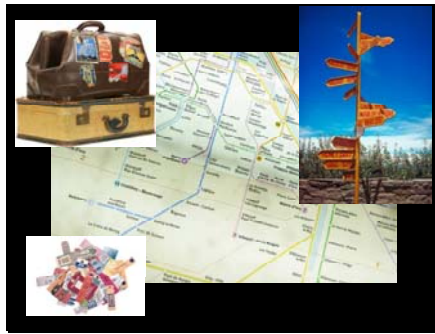
Create a bulletin board – physical or electronic – where groups can post notes from their meetings.

Create templates for work groups to use to identify their purpose and activities along with contact info and keep those somewhere handy for everyone.

Find ways to let everyone communicate to everyone else when there might be meetings or events that others can

attend. A kiosk in a central place .. A home room bulletin board ... Electronic media like web sites with a link to each group and email lists can be handy ... but it's often good to have a physical exchange place too.

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Find ways to help everyone get out and about and show up in all parts of the system.

Different groups might take turns being the “host” for a meeting of all the groups. The coordinating team create a schedule of visits so they make it to all parts of the system on some kind of rotation.

Even if everyone is in the same building – it can make a difference to go to a different floor or to a different conference room rather than having everyone always come to a central place.

Where you stand does sometime depend on where you sit.



### **Create Footprints in Physical Space**

Self-organized work groups can feel very vague and abstract which makes it hard for both group members and others in the organization to experience the group as “real” and important. In a regular work group, the physical space and artifacts in it serve as reminders that the work group exists - the names of everyone on in-boxes, the space around a shared secretary where you’re likely to run into other work group members, the corridor where everyone has an office.

Group "footprints" are the artifacts that give a work group visibility to themselves and others. They serve as an anchor . Catching a glimpse of the group picture out of the corner of your eye is a subliminal reminder of the group, and makes it present for you.

*Without these footprints, a self-organized group can disappear off the radar screens of others in the organization and group members can lose a sense of themselves as part of the group. Lacking reminders, members can forget to tune into various group communication channels unless there is something pressing.*

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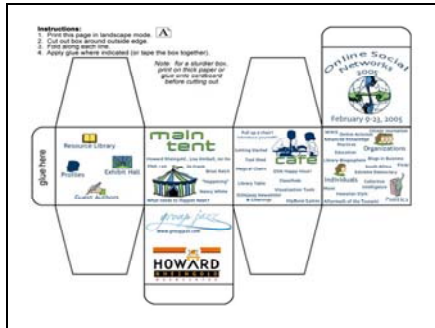


Document everything ... think of yourself (yourselves) as sociologists who want to capture all the pieces of evidence you can find.

One tactic for creating footprints is to create “outputs” in various formats with some kind of “branding” that people will come to associate with the work of a particular group.

Even something as simple as those “Message from .....” notepads can reinforce the sense that the group is REAL. Create message pads for each different sub-group so they feel a sense that they are special

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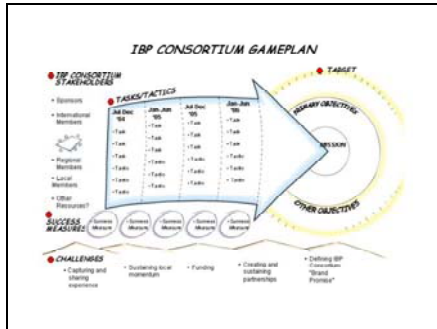
Artifacts are an important component of great experiences. Participants can download this origami box and print it out on their own printer. You can put whatever you want on the piece! When they have an object on their desk – it serves as a reminder of the activity or group and makes it more likely that they will connect more frequently. It’s also another good conversation starter – when colleagues pass by and say “What’s that?” there’s an opportunity to talk about what the group is doing and perhaps recruit a new member!

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Even when you're having a relatively informal meeting it is sometimes worthwhile to send out a fun invitation via postcard or flyer or even in the regular mail. This can also work if you are having a series of meetings (for example, the monthly “brown bag” lunch session). People tend to put the invites in their calendar or on their reminder board so they are more likely to remember to come. It also creates opportunities for group members to share what’s happening with the group with others who may notice the invite on their desk and ask “What’s that about?” ... invitations are also handy to pass along to others.

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Using graphics can literally help people get and stay on the same page. This is especially helpful when a group is meeting sporadically because it’s easy to get out of synch.

Even if I’m only working on one sub-task – I can see where that fits in the whole .. I can see where we’re going ... get a sense of how we might keep track of progress ...

Find ways to capture information about what’s going on – the schedule, the tasks, the members of the group and makes sure everyone has copies.

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One way to think about a work group is as a network of conversations that cover a broad range of topics and questions:

How is the work group doing on its critical strategic goals?

How are the work group's processes working?

How are individuals on the work group doing?

What's going on in the organization?

What's going on in the world?

What are people on the work group reading and thinking?

What problems need attention?

What should we be doing next?

A work group will function best if it feels like everyone is part of a

continuous, daily conversation with the whole group.

A big danger for self-organized work groups is that their communications get stale and boring.. It's critical to keep the group communications fresh and growing - both qualitatively and quantitatively.

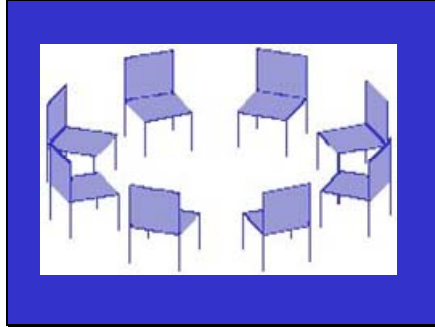
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Exercise: Think about the different kinds of interactions you need to have with your work group (formal/informal, learning/creating, tasks/ideas, relationships/activities) Which ones are hardest to sustain in a self-organized work group?

What could you do to create some different patterns of conversations?

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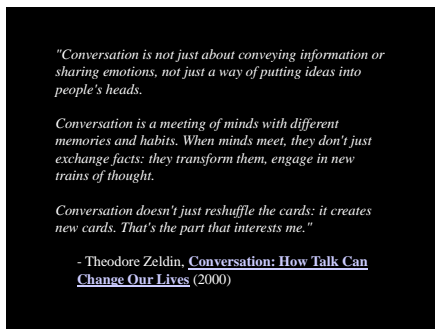
It's sometimes easy for self-organized groups to default into a pattern of "serial reporting" where every meeting consists of a series of reports about what different individuals or sub-groups have done since the last meeting.

This is BORING – especially after the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> report.

See if you can create some different dynamics by setting up opportunities to have richer conversations. There are many processes that can help – dialogue, world café, conversation café ...

It's usually worth it to take the time to rearrange the room to make it possible to sit in a circle.

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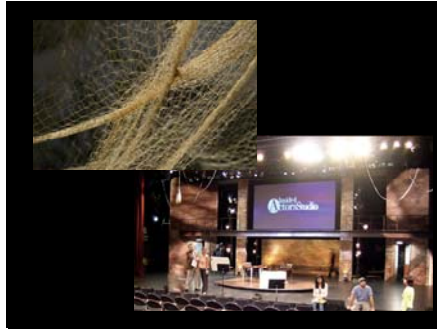
*"Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, not just a way of putting ideas into people's heads.*

*Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, engage in new trains of thought.*

*Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards. That's the part that interests me."*

- Theodore Zeldin, Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives (2000)

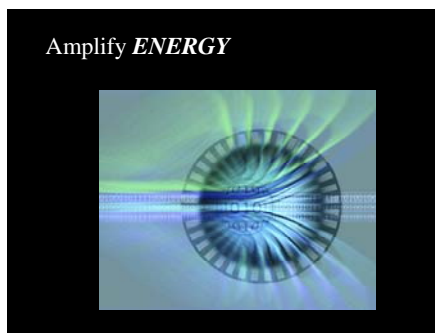
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Enrich the group's conversations by casting the net widely and inviting others into the conversation. Think outside the box. Who might you invite from other roles, other parts of the organization – even outside the organization.

One tactic for doing this that can be fun is to create a “talk show” format where you invite people in to tell their story in a way that can feel more comfortable than when they think they need to make some kind of presentation. Creating a series can provide a way to perturb the group regularly.

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You need to find ways to blow on the embers in a network of self-organized groups so that everyone has the opportunity to benefit from every bit of energy in the system.

When we're all together in a close knit team – we get a kind of “contact high” when another member gets off the phone and can't wait to tell everyone about the interesting thing that just happened. In self-organized groups – especially those that don't meet often and are distributed across an organization – you miss this opportunity so energy tends to drain out of the system rather than charge it up.

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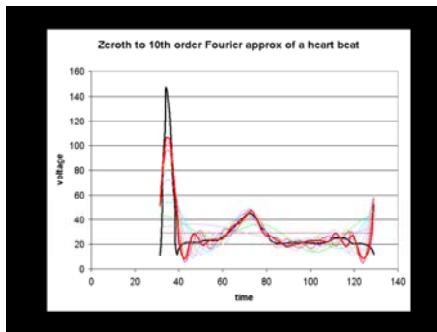
Find ways to amplify energy:

By shining a spotlight on different people and groups so that everyone learns what they are doing ...

By providing everyone with mechanisms to toot their own horn ..

Encourage a “norm” that individuals and groups share things – even when they seem small and insignificant – because that’s what’s going to help EVERYONE feel good about momentum ...

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You need a pulse to have a life.

Groups need a pulse to feel alive and cookin’

That means finding ways to connect that have a regular rhythm ...

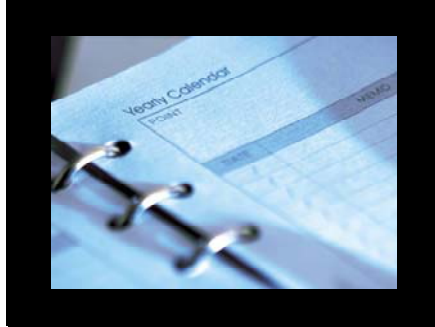
the monthly “lunch bunch” where everyone comes together on the first Monday or the 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday to check in.

A weekly check-in call ..

A quarterly summit meeting ...

Knowing that a connection time is coming up is often a good motivator to get something done or take something to a next level.

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Milestones associated with dates really help groups feel a sense of moving ahead toward something.

Sometimes projects have a very long time horizon and groups can lose energy because they have to wait so long to get somewhere ... It can help to define smaller, earlier milestones so that the group can feel that they are making progress as soon as possible. For example, "Next month it's our turn to host the informal lunch so let's have a learning/reflection session before that so that we can get the conversation going."

At the same time, it's exciting to look forward to something special that will happen down the road. Special events have the added advantage of providing opportunities for many different individuals to take on roles (the invitation, the logistics, sharing a story, hosting a speaker, greeting arrivals) which makes them feel more connected.

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And, of course, there's nothing that amplifies as well as "buzz" ...

How will you find ways to make what you're doing Topic A at the water cooler? How will the good stories enter the system and generate buzz?

Sometimes there are key people in an organization who, if they KNOW the story will pass it along to everyone. How will you get them engaged?

Sometimes there are key vehicles for communication in an organization such that if something is "covered" in those newsletters or announcements or whatever that thing gains credibility and

feels “real” to everyone ... Who makes those things happen and how can you get them involved?

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