

# Liberating-Structures-with-Tom-Melancon-

📅 Thu, 7/14 9:05AM 🕒 17:36

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, liberating structures, structures, called, group, person, exercise, questions, liberating, idea, tools, problem, timely, sounds, book, labor relations, seattle, conversation, talk, different variations

## SPEAKERS

Emily Martin, Tom Melancon

---

- E** Emily Martin 00:09  
In labor relations, negotiations are rarely just between two individual people. They almost always involve teams of people. And when the two sides gather at the bargaining table, or at labor management meetings, this becomes a group of people gathered together to solve problems and reach agreements. So finding facilitation tools that are able to unlock the power of groups is useful in labor relations. In this episode of the PERColator, I'm talking with Tom Melancon, Strategy Officer at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service about Liberating Structures. Liberating Structures are facilitation tools that negotiators might find helpful in bargaining within a bargaining team, for conversations with constituents, or in any other setting that could benefit from tools to help have better conversations.
- E** Emily Martin 01:04  
Hey, Tom, how are you today?
- T** Tom Melancon 01:06  
I'm good, Emily. Thank you. Thanks for having me.
- E** Emily Martin 01:09  
Well, I'm so excited to have you today as a guest on our podcast. And I've invited you today to join us and talk about liberating structures and how that could apply to negotiations and labor relations. So my first question for you, Tom, is what are liberating structures? And how did you get into them?
- T** Tom Melancon 01:24

Okay, yeah, it's a good starting question. So liberating structures is a group of exercises, small group exercises, is a good way to describe them, that were put together in a book that came out. I'm thinking I've had the book at least 10 years, it's called, "The surprising power of liberating structures," and the authors are Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless. And the kind of the subtitle to the book is simple rules to unleash a culture of innovation. So there are 33, small group exercises, interactions, and the thing that, to me made them stand out is that they're structured in a way that I could use them pretty easily. I could, and we'll talk I'm sure about some examples later on, but I could take them either from the website, because they have a really good website that we could share the link to, or the book that I bought a few years ago, and just adapt it to either the training or mediation or whatever I was involved in that I thought it might apply to.

E

Emily Martin 02:29

Great. So it sounds like there are a series of tools to use in facilitation to work with the group?

T

Tom Melancon 02:35

Exactly.

E

Emily Martin 02:35

Yeah, yeah. So what are some of your favorites?

T

Tom Melancon 02:39

Yeah. So I think maybe it's useful to talk about examples of when I've used it in work, and I can I can do that without naming particular parties. But yeah, so just to describe one of them that I've used quite a few times is one that's called TRIZ, okay. And they always, they have kind of these interesting names. And sometimes it takes a little while to drill down to find out what the trick is, what the TRIZ came from. And I actually can't remember off the top of my head, where TRIZ comes from, the application I can think of is like a labor management group I'm working with, and it's a labor management committee that's trying to improve their relationship, right. So it's a labor management committee that I'm training, and I'll have them do this exercise. And what it asks them to do is to think about the opposite of their goal, if their goal is to have the best labor management relationship possible, what behaviors actions activities, would they see, that would be the opposite of that they would create the worst environment possible. And then they list those, and there's a process of kind of, you know, a small group process around that. And then you can take different variations on it, you could say, Okay, now, out of that list that you just created of the worst possible behaviors, or traits or scenes, you know, signs of a labor management relationship. Are there elements that you see in your, your work right now, are there things that you're actually, you know, seeing that you're playing out in real time, and then you can talk about that. And there's so with each of the structures, there's a setup, and then you can run a number of different variations on that theme. But that's, that's one that comes to mind.

E

Emily Martin 04:26

Excellent. That sounds like a lot of fun, because you're kind of thinking about like the opposite. Like, how can we be really awful at this and then you're, you're thinking about how to flip that into something useful. That sounds like a really fun exercise to be able to work with a group to help solve a problem.

T

Tom Melancon 04:40

Yeah, and I think that point you just made about the fun element seems to be one of the threads that runs through a lot of these structures. They're fun to do. And, you know, as we've been for the last couple of years in mostly virtual environments, the activities translate pretty well virtually but they really really were developed to be done in a room with live people and you're interacting physically. And so, you know, one of the other ones that I've done when I'm at a conference, and I want to have an opening activity, there's this beginning exercise called impromptu networking. And it's just a series of questions you give people that they can roam around a room with people they've never met and asked these questions. And you know, it sounds like, okay, it's really simple. And how novel is that? But it's just put together in a way that is interesting enough and easy enough to use that, like I said, I've taken it off the shelf, done it in conferences, and within 15 minutes, you have everybody in the room interacting together, and asking each other a question related to the topic at hand, right? Or a couple of questions. So they are really fun.

E

Emily Martin 05:48

That sounds great. So it sounds like liberating structures has a menu of ideas that you can use to work with a group, whether it's a icebreaker kind of opening in a conference, or whether you're in a group in a meeting doing something together. But that sounds like a nice way to think about what might be some good ideas.

T

Tom Melancon 06:06

Yeah, and I'm not a I'm not gonna give any legal advice on this. I don't think that's the idea. But they do have the sort of user, what am I coming up with, the license, or whatever you want to call it for us is pretty broad. So as long as you're not, you know, trying to charge money or put your handle out there as a liberating structures guru or whatever, just using it in the context of your work, it's open, you know, what I'm talking about, the license is like an open source kind of.

E

Emily Martin 06:38

It seems like it's really structured as a way to, here's a bunch of really great ideas. And here's some recipes on how to do them. So I first learned about liberating structures from you, years ago, yeah, you did a session. It was it was down south of Seattle, and you know, a bunch of

mediators there. I forget what it was called. But that's what opened my eyes to it. And it feels like, it was such a handy set of tools that was organized so well that I could think about, oh, here's a tool, here's what how long it will take, here's the goal of the tool. Here's how to start it.

**T** Tom Melancon 07:15

Yeah, yeah, they really do lay it out easily. Like that was a workshop that was done with the Federal Executive Board, and if I remember correctly, I was kind of in the process of working out of that position. I used to manage that that ADR group, but they actually brought somebody in from kind of the liberating structures group who was a trainer. And so that was a real treat, because that person had kind of the, you know, but you don't have to be you don't have to have that level of expertise to do it. Another one that you've probably seen, because it's it's kind of another thing that they do with the structures is they can be strung together, as you know, in these successions, that makes sense. And one of them that I've used, often is called, 1-2-4-All, and it's just really simply a way to bring people through a process of thinking about a question or a topic, where they meditated on their own for a minute, you know, to kind of acknowledge that there are people that process things internally and are more introverted than extroverted, that they combine into pairs, and kind of share the topics that they came up with. And then they come together as a group of four, and kind of compare, combined, contrast those ideas, and then the whole group comes together. And the whole thing can be done in about 12 minutes. And again, it's a very interactive, fun way to work through a topic. And that can be that 1-2-4-All structure can be interwoven in a bunch of different structures that are in the set.

**E** Emily Martin 08:47

Oh, that sounds great. And I feel like that sounds like it's a great way to balance the ability for people to have some introspection and some thought before they just start, everyone talking on top of each other, you know, everyone has a chance to think, everybody has a chance to reach some conclusion. They don't have to raise their hand in front of the group in the beginning, they just have to think about what do they want to share with one person. And then the pair gets to talk about what was interesting to share with another pair, and you and you slowly build up. So when you get to the group conversation, it might not be exactly what every little group talked about, but you get the essence of some really good things.

**T** Tom Melancon 09:23

Exactly. So should I talk about a couple more?

**E** Emily Martin 09:27

Oh I'd love it! Yes, no, that's great.

**T** Tom Melancon 09:30

So you know, there's another one that's called Heard, Seen and Respected (HSR) Heard, Seen

So you know, there's another one that's called Heard, Seen and Respected (HSR) Heard Seen and Respected. And, again, it's a very simple idea. And it's basically a listening exercise, is the way I describe it. It's a very simple way to have a pair of people listen to one another very intensely, intently. But what I found is there are so many applications in a conflict resolution workshop that I've done. I'll have people use this Heard Seen and Respected, and the idea is, don't ask questions. Don't try to figure out why, don't do any of the things that maybe your mediator mind is telling you to do. Just listen. And it forces you to just use your ears and you, the fact that you can't ask questions, it's actually very difficult for people that have been used to asking questions for many years in the work they do. And I've used it in that setting. I've also used it in more intense team conflicts, where I'll ask the parties and you know, when we're working together for a couple of days, and trying to work through some of the deeper issues that a team might be having, I'll ask people to pair up. And this is been fascinating to me. Two or three times when I've used it in this context, the two people that had the biggest conflict on those teams, on opposite parts of the teams, found each other, did this exercise, and they had a breakthrough.

E

Emily Martin 10:59

Oh, wow. So you let that pick their own partner? Is that how you do it? Oh, wow!

T

Tom Melancon 11:04

Yeah! And it was way beyond what I expected for this to happen the first time and I was like, wait, wait, wait, I would just I had no idea it was gonna go there. And they went right to the heart of what they needed to talk about with each other. And it kind of broke open the rest of the day. So I thought that was a super powerful application of that particular tool.

E

Emily Martin 11:23

And it sounds like a really timely tool right now. I mean, we we've been living in such a weird world for a couple of years now. And I'm wondering if our ability to listen to each other and how that works, might need a tune up after all these remote times and, and weird communication, where we can't actually see each other. So whether it's online or in person, practicing those listening skills, seems like it's really timely right now.

T

Tom Melancon 11:46

Right, and all the silos we seem to find ourselves in, right, and how it can be, you know, so you know, yeah. And in group sort of bias that we can develop from not seeing people outside of our groups for so long, right? Yeah, there's all those reasons, I think that's probably more timely than ever. I can go ahead and share a couple more, but I don't want to overwhelm you.

E

Emily Martin 12:09

No, No, that's great! Go, Go!

T

Tom Melancon 12:10

Well, so I mean, it's funny, because as I thought about it, today, I just kept having these examples that kept popping out to me, and I know you're familiar with many of these that I've already listed, and feel free to share any example of your own. But so another one that I've enjoyed, and it's kind of a risky, sort of, there is a risk involved in some of these. And, and I like that because it forces people out of their comfort zone, and this one is called Troika Consulting. And the idea for this one, again, it can be done virtually, but I've, I've found it really powerful if you're actually in a room full of people, you have people separate into groups of three, and one person volunteers to present a problem to the other two people. And the other two serve as consultants and the person presents, okay, I have a problem, I'm having a problem with my next door neighbor, I'll just make that up, right. And so over the dispute about where my property line begins, and their's ends, and, and then the two consultants, it's all very structured, they have a few minutes to ask some clarifying questions of the person who's presenting the problem. And then they they actually have the person physically turn their chair around, so that their back is to the consultants. And the consultants spend the next few minutes talking to each other about the person's problem. It sounds like it sounds crazy, but it's risky, like, Oh, my God, I'm going to tell these people a problem, and they're going to talk about me behind my back literally behind my back. That's what happens. And then the person after that said, they turn around, and then they give feedback to the consultants. And it's, it's a way for people to get super honest with each other really fast, right? So it's a risk. But I found it to be really powerful. And people are respectful of the fact that this is a person that's taking a risk. And this is my experience. They're taking a risk. So we're not going to say something awful. When they turn their back around, we're going to say things that are very supportive and affirming and, but also maybe explore some areas that they haven't looked into yet. So I found that to be that would be very, very powerful as well.

E

Emily Martin 14:26

I think that's a great example of a liberating structure because it changes the format of the conversation in a way that's not intuitive. It's not how we normally sit around and talk about things right. So it it mixes it up. And maybe that works if you walk in you say hey, let's try something different. Let's let's do some problem solving in a different way. I have an idea rather than like, hey, let's do a liberating structure like you know, in fact, I had some friends who, who I met some people that that do liberating structures as a as like a consultant for like, big companies in Seattle, but they don't necessarily say, Today's liberating structure is x, they just kind of come in and say, Hey, we're gonna work on this problem and do it, X and Y and Z. So it's almost like, you do it, but you don't necessarily, you just do it as an idea to get a group going, you know?

T

Tom Melancon 15:14

Yeah, yeah. Exactly. And, you know, and, uh, you know, this, some of the ideas aren't like, brand new, you know, there's, there's an idea in there called Conversation Cafe, and there's an there's an appreciative inquiry, right? But they're packaged in a way that they're very easy to use, no matter what your your level is of entry. And that's what I like about it.

E

Emily Martin 15:35

Right, Right. And that's another thing I like about liberating structures is, I mean, I mentioned before, it seems easy, but that web page is fantastic. It seems like, yeah, you can buy the book, and, and, you know, but but right there on the webpage is a really great way to poke around and try out some ideas and see what might work. And we'll see where this could go.

T

Tom Melancon 15:56

You really do have everything you need. If you want to get started, you know, you just have to be dangerous. No, but it really is good. It's got the menu of all the different structures, and it breaks them down for you. And, and, yeah, we should also mention that, you know, because one of the founders and the writers of the book is from Seattle here, Keith McCanless. I don't know how much he stays involved in this, but there is actually a meetup group. And I believe if they haven't changed, it's been a while since I've been there. But they get together on Thursday evenings, like once a month. And people and um, my guess is that it's been virtual for a while, but prior to, you know, the pandemic, they were meeting in person. And but the idea is people get together and someone who leads leads people through some a couple of these structures and people get to practice with it from from people in Seattle. So if you're interested, if you go on meetup, you know, that app meetup.com Or wherever you can find the liberating structures user groups, I think what they call it.

T

Tom Melancon 17:00

Absolutely.

E

Emily Martin 17:01

Sounds great. Sounds great. So thanks so much for coming here on the podcast today and talking to me about this.

E

Emily Martin 17:10

Thank you again, thanks for coming today. And thanks for being a part of the conversation. And I think this is all of such great stuff. And you've been inspiring me to think about liberating structures. So I'm so excited to share this with everybody else.

T

Tom Melancon 17:22

Thank you. It's been my pleasure.