

Tool: Container Building

Overview

Container Building is the process of creating a safe space for a group or a team by establishing both trust and ground rules for engagement. A container in this context is defined by the boundaries of a social field and incorporates three qualities: open mind (seeing), open heart (feeling), and open will (intention). A container sets the tone for a journey that is about to unfold by providing a safe space for risk-taking in an atmosphere that supports growth and learning.

Application

Container Building is done at the beginning of a social process (in person or remote) and establishes foundation for a group. By creating a container, facilitators improve how participants pay attention, interact, and collaborate. Challenging situations and deep change especially require this work.

Principles

- **Be clear** about roles and steps.
- **Listen** with an open mind, heart, and will.
- **Suspend your voice of judgment** to activate the creative power of the open mind.
- **Respect the voice and opinions of others**, even if they are different from your own.
- **Pay attention** to those on the margins of the social field.
- **Consider the boundaries** of the container and agreements made between the people.

Resources

- Bird, Kelly. 2018. *Generative Scribing: An Art of the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: PI Press.
- Cecil, Barbara, Glennifer Gillespie, and Otto Scharmer. 2003. "The Presence of the Circle Being: Conversation with the Circle of Seven." *Dialogue on Leadership Interviews*. www.presencing.org.
- Isaacs, William. 1999. *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Currency-Doubleday.
- Scharmer, Otto. 2018. *The Essentials of Theory U*, Chapter 5. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Process

Setup

- **People:** Clarify who is part of the process and who holds what role.
- **Place:** Ensure that the quality of the room reflects the quality of what you want to create. For example: an innovation process might require a different set-up than a team-building process.
- **Time:** Spaciousness in time supports Container Building. Don't rush a process.
- **Materials:** Choose materials appropriate for the purpose of the group work.

Steps

Step 1: Prepare the Inner Conditions

Container Building requires preparation. The process includes paying attention to the inner condition of the facilitator and of the participants.

Inner conditions of the facilitator(s):

Theory U states that the inner condition of the intervenor defines the success of an intervention. The more complex a process, the deeper this exploration should be. The following questions can assist the facilitators in evaluating their own inner condition. Answer them with a brief journaling process.

1. Why am I doing this work? What is my highest hope and aspiration for the process?
2. Where am I, physically and mentally?
3. Who (energetically) holds me? Who do I hold?

Practice Option:

- Go on a walk with your co-facilitator or a mentor and reflect on the above questions.

Inner conditions of the participants:

Preparation can also include the participants, by deepening their awareness of the work ahead. Not all processes require this. But the more complex a situation, the more this will help the work.

Practice Options:

- Organize enrollment interviews with participants.
- Ask participants to conduct Stakeholder Interviews.
- Set up a mentorship or buddy system between participants.

Step 2. Initiate the Process

1. Use check-ins and introductions as an invitation for everyone to participate and feel welcome.
2. Facilitate agreement on the “what and how” regarding the agenda and process.
3. Establish connections between everyone in the room—for example, by hearing each voice (if the group is large, split into smaller groups).

Step 3: Facilitate the holding space for differences to arise

Facilitate the agreed-upon process while actively maintaining the three levels of awareness:

1. **Seeing with open eyes** to break through patterns of downloading. Ask: What is inside my field of attention, and what is outside it? What might be my blind spot?
2. **Holding.** Paying attention to the whole of the social field and the quality of “being with” through interaction and communication. Ask: What relationship qualities are represented? Are any relational interventions needed?
3. **Supporting.** As a facilitator you shift your awareness from what currently *is* to the *emerging whole*. We are no longer two things, but we are acting *as one*. This inner shift creates the conditions in which something new can grow.

Practice Option 1: Mindfulness

Pay attention to your posture, to how you are standing or sitting when you are in the group, and to your breath. Practice broadening your awareness of the social field that you are facilitating.

Practice Option 2: Reflection-in-Action

- What is hard for you to see, hold, or support in the system?
- Where are resources and points of strength?
- Who is being excluded? What voices are not being heard?
- What emotions come up for you? Why? Use your own feelings as an “organ of perception”.