Episode: 59

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Amiel Handelsman: Keith, first of all, I wanted to mention to you that I've actually been using these liberating structures since I came across your website. In fact, I just led a session for people in the adult development field about the Enneagram, and we went through the 1-2-4-All a couple of times and it worked really, really well.

Keith McCandless: Good.

Amiel: I would love to start off with hearing about, briefly about the background that you have that brought you to discover or invent liberating structures.

Keith: I'm happy to do that. Well, I think the most important thing that we didn't write about in the book very much, complexity science, so the ideas, the exciting principles in complexity science that -- For example, little things can make a big difference; nonlinearity, patterns or systems are embedded in systems are embedded systems are embedded in systems, and their relationship among those embedded systems makes a big difference in regard to transformational change. A bunch of the principles in complexity science helped me to question conventional approaches to change and management and leadership, and question really everything about how we organize. It's so fundamental. So different was the science underneath that; different than cause and effect and equal and opposite reaction. Those things don't really explain human beings or human organizing very well, so I was a conventional consultant well before that. I was interested in transforming the health system. I did a series of -- Served in a series of roles from community health planner trying to get the right number of hospitals and health resources in communities to being a policy and planning person for the hospitals in Washington State to starting and operating, leading a healthcare quality foundation that had business in university researchers, and all kinds of great people who were very smart. In all of those positions, our really smart thinking didn't seem to do very much to change

or sustain change in the health system, so I think the most important thing was failure for me in those ventures, and after those positions and mostly around the northwest. I went down to San Francisco and worked for kind of a healthcare think tank – the healthcare forum you mentioned that you know; you used to read the journal. Very visionary. Again, we were going to envision – we are going to think our way; we're going to dream our way into the future. Also, not impressed with that. It was actually more dangerous than some of the other approaches. If you get your vision wrong, the future state you are working toward, you miss everything. You don't actually notice what's unfolding around you, so even that made me question, "Do I have the wrong theory or is it some other theory," so this complexity science was a huge deal. I had to run around the country and eventually found a group of people from very diverse backgrounds; very different disciplines even – physics, mathematics, medicine, and in that group, I bumped in, when he retired from his working life, his corporate life -- I bumped into Henri, the co-author, my co-author. So, that's the very short history of where it came from. Once I met Henri, it got serious. We started doing things together. We started trying out the very first liberating structures, many of which you know because you're in the field, are borrowed from brilliant -- We stand on the shoulders of appreciative inquiry or David Cooperrider, and other terrific thinkers and dramatically simplified some of the insights that they generated in their work, and then we started inventing our own together. Yeah, so that's kind of maybe enough? Is that enough about --

Amiel: Okay. I want to ask a follow up question actually because you describe some of the conventional ways of working. I wondered could you give me two things that I would have seen you doing conventionally that you later realized were not working that you did over and over again, a non-liberating structure?

Keith: Yeah. You have to imagine as I'm telling you this. Henri, my co-author and I, both did these things I'm going to mention, and at various points in time, we needed to physically restrain one another from doing these things, and that's how much a habit they were, and still I fall off the horse, so the one is presenting; me presenting, so a presentation as a conventional structure. I'm the expert. I shape through a presentation or lecture what direction we might go. The rest of the people are sort of out there and I'm laying it on them. They're the unwashed or the -- There are various ways to make fun of it, but I take up all the time, and maybe at the end I remember that there are other brilliant people there that could contribute and I'll say, "Any Questions," but the questions are kind of a throw-away thing, and now I talk about that that's an over-controlling. I go up into my head, and even as we were developing the liberating structures, this is when Henri had to restrain me. I'd start talking about all the backgrounds of the liberating

structure and not use the liberating structure with all of the interesting theoretical aspects, which no one, almost no one was interested in except me and Henri, right.

Amiel: Okay. Let me interject, and if that's okay, I'll be interrupting from time to time because I think all of us need to be restrained so I want to know what did Henri physically do to restrain you?

Keith: He came up behind me and grabbed me and said, "Shut up," for various points in time, and we'd be in a country --

Amiel: Okay.

Keith: -- we'd be in Brazil or France or somewhere, sometimes he'd come step right in front of me and just look me in the eye, and he didn't have to say anything after a while because I was helping him with the same thing. We both went on and on and on thinking we were helping, but we were over-helping, which is exactly the same thing as over-controlling, right, so when you're over-helping, you're underestimating the capability of the people you're working with to handle it, to take responsibility for it. I'm not sure who was over-helping or over-controlling, but they were the same thing.

Amiel: Okay. Can you flip it around then? What was something, if you don't mind saying, that Henri often did that you had to restrain him from it, how you did that?

Keith: Oh, absolutely the same thing except his was a slightly different style. Mine was, "I'm going to explain a lot about the background," and his was a little bit more from the role of very successful executive, very much, "I'm saying something in which the right answer is in here somewhere and you'll find it if you try hard enough," --

Amiel: Right.

Keith: -- and those habits were pretty hard to break. The other part of your question is also quite interesting. The thing that you understand once you've lectured to your audience or have done the presentation, they are pacified. They are slumping in their chair. They're bored out of their mind. They're doing something else. You know, whatever. You've lost them for that period of time, so then a typical thing that I used to do would be to go to an open discussion or brainstorming, and both of those are under-controlled. Anybody can say anything at any time and let's just take the open discussion. Very typical that we're good people in an organization or me would go from I'm controlling all the space; me, I'm shaping it, I'm doing the thinking here to anybody can contribute, and there's usually a leader-moderator, but anybody jumps in, and that's so under-controlled that it's not productive. It's as unproductive as the presentation, as the

over-controlling, and usually it is because a couple of people, a few people in the group, the loudest, the people quickest to jump in, dominate the conversation and we now call it -- They get into a goat rodeo. There's kicking and biting and it's very amusing, but nothing productive happens during the goat rodeo.

Amiel: And everyone else is asleep so the goats have a lot of space to move.

Keith: Well, they may be amused by it, but they become more cynical. That's just it, and then the leader who wants something productive to happen, and you, I understand from what I read about you, you try to help leaders; the leader is left to pretend that there is consensus arising out of the goat rodeo, that those few people who are biting and kicking each other (I'm being a little facetious but it comes down to that a fair amount). Something like that where people are lobbing things up in the air and mostly misunderstanding each other and there can be resentment or just cynicism just after a period of time. The leader if left with the job of saying something at the end, trying to pull together the various threads themselves and say, "Okay, we've achieved consensus. This is how we're going to move forward," and it's a false promise. It didn't happen during that goat rodeo, and it didn't happen during the presentation, and so I'm not different than anyone else. I would go back and forth between this over-controlling presentation thing to the under-controlling open discussion and brainstorming is actually a lot like open discussion with post-it notes, so those two things -- There's a huge space in between those two, between under-control/not productive and over-control/mind-numbing or exclusive, a small circle or one person is shaping direction. Liberating structures sort of naturally fit in between, but I'm aware of how hard they are to develop. We develop them to influence the habits in everyday work life or everyday organizing, beyond work life. Early on, we discovered people immediately started applying them to their family, to themselves, their family, their church, their school, their kids. Just a side note – The first time we were down in Brazil, we did our first real immersion workshop where we thought we had a repertoire to share, and Henri and I do it and we hung around a few days and had office hours and anybody could come in out of the 80 or 90 people at the workshop. Anybody could come and ask for an hour of our time and we would help them on their specific challenge that they had, and the first few people came in. The first person came in and said, "Well, I'd like to talk with you about my spouse." We were like, "Uh, what," and then "my kids and their school." Work was number five on the list, and this was a corporate workshop we were putting on and we were management guys, so we were dumbfounded. I was dumbfounded. I think Henri was, too, that immediately people started applying these very simple methods to everything, every kind of relationship in their life.

Yeah, so that was a side note, but what I discovered in there through the going back and forth for myself between wanting to say too much and present to the group and then going to anybody can say anything, open discussion, that back and forth, that I had the same habits that I'm still working with groups as we introduce liberating structures to groups and it's very liberating. There is a look that people get immediately and then there are the ones that get super excited about it. It's a euphoria, and in that, every person has a set of habits. These things are different enough. We've tapped into something that's just fundamentally different. Even though they love the idea of them and they can see how they work, they have to overcome those old habits of over-control.

Amiel: No matter how excited you are about the new pattern, the old habit, it lives in the body.

Keith: It's in the body, and it's like -- Everyone else in the world has seen the backwards bicycle riding. Have you ever seen this video?

Amiel: No.

Keith: It's about neuroplasticity. If you are younger, it's pretty easy to accomplish this task I'm going to describe, but here's an engineer; the welders in his little company make him a bicycle that when you turn to the left, it actually turns the wheels to the right --

Amiel: I see.

Keith: -- so his body has learned to turn a conventional bicycle. They give him this bike. He can't even steady it. He's falling off. It's nine months before he can rewire his brain, his habits, his whole being to ride in this way. It takes his son maybe (I'm going to get this wrong) three weeks or something like that, but still, even as you're just learning a bike, that all gets imprinted. Nine months later, he's somewhere else and he decides to see, "Well, now I've mastered this backwards bicycle riding. I've rewired my brain to do it. Of course I can go back to the conventional way." Well, no he can't. It takes a half an hour or 45 minutes of wiring, so there is something convenient about this. It's very natural for us to develop these habits. They are hard to break. We can break them, but we're not quite as plastic and flexible, as adaptable as we would think, so it takes a while. You can immediately get results with these. It sounds like you have with the 1-2-4-All. It's a miracle what happens. Every voice is included. You can feel the energy rise. That's the first thing that happens in the group. There's ownership. You don't have to get buy-in later. You don't have to force people to do anything --

Amiel: Yes.

Keith: -- and that, I'm kind of convinced that that is a value that we hold and lots of places that we include people; everybody has a voice. We say all these things, but almost all of our habits, the microstructures -- Sorry, this is language that we're using because we don't have very good language for this. I know you like language, but the little patterns of interaction, the smallest microstructures. That's what we're changing. That's what liberating structures are. The liberation, that comes for free, but you've got to learn before you start using these little shifts in the microstructures, and that makes it possible for us to live in a way to live our values, so if our value is everybody has a voice, we include people, and this is what you'll hear in almost every organization, every church, every government, and when you introduce liberating structures and the group starts to use them, they'll go, "Oh, my!" Their breath is taken away, and I believe it's taken away because they're actually able to act on the values. Their values. They can live them now rather than say them and know that they're only partially realized.

Amiel: And they can do it themselves. I think, too, is that you've demystified these, and I want to encourage listeners while we get into some of the actual structures to go to the notes, to the episode, and I'll include a link to the menu of liberating structures that shows names and icons and more, and they're very short and simple names. I almost imagine that you and Henri set a limit on the number of syllables you could have. Did you?

Keith: We focused on -- Well, early on, we had a sense that this work, these microstructures, should be in the drinking water everywhere in the world for young people, for everyone, for future generations, so we wanted something that would translate everywhere in the world, so simplicity –

Amiel: Right.

Keith: -- so the number of words, visually appealing, all of those things for two people like Henri and myself to do that; I'm hooked on theory, organizational theory, and he's hooked on management stuff. We tried really hard to put this all in the vernacular, make it as simple as possible, visually appealing, and for your listeners, that's all true, and we still find that the repertoire is a bit overwhelming, so, Amiel, there's something called The Liberating Structures Selection Matchmaker, and what we did with that is just -- And anyone can do this -- No understanding. They don't have to know a thing about liberating structures or any of the icons or any of that stuff. It's a sheet with thirty-three short phrases and it asks the person -- You can try and see if it works for you, and it asks, "Given what you're trying to accomplish in the world, read through these thirty-three. Circle five or six or seven that if you were able to accomplish this with the people around

you; if you were able to do this thing that this little phrase says, circle it," and let's say you have seven items after you've circled them and they're all very simple what they're saying. Maybe the idea underneath it isn't as simple, but they are things that any person can say, "We need to do that to move forward." They circle those and that's the beginning of what we call a string, and it's a logical sequence of things you can do to make real progress on a challenge you face or what you're trying to accomplish, and that is the simplest we've been able -- That's really our goal. Anyone and everyone. We weren't trying to create a set of tools for consultants or coaches or anyone like yourself who's really into this stuff. We're trying to give something, provide something to anyone on the front line to liberate themselves and their colleagues.

Amiel: Well, I'd love to have us get into some examples and why don't we just start with 1-2-4-All and just a brief description of what that is and when a group might use it.

Keith: Great, so it is exactly what it sounds like, so the "1" of the 1-2-4-All is one minute to think for yourself, and this is our nod to introverts.

Amiel: Yay! Introverts. Yes! I'm an introvert.

Keith: Yes, introverts. Yes, and your brilliance is far too -- I'm speaking generally, but specifically --

Amiel: I was feeling good there for a second, Keith. You can speak specifically.

Keith: Hey, you should feel good.

Amiel: I want all the other introverts to feel included, so, yes, speak generally.

Keith: Yes, yes. Because it's not enough, but it's something, okay, and it happens repeatedly because you use 1-2-4-All a lot, so in that one minute you get to collect your thoughts, which never happens. This never happens in typical settings, and we encourage people to write "it" down; whatever it is, an insight or this could be on any topic. It could be, "What should we do next to move forward," so that's one minute you might jot it down just for yourself. The "2" is two minutes for two people to bounce their ideas. They aren't asked to agree. They're just sharing their ideas. All of our activities, liberating structures, are designed to work with difference, to make more out of difference, not to quickly try to converge things. We want to hold the difference, so the "2" is two minutes talking about that idea. The "4" is four minutes together in a group and that little group of four is looking for patterns, what's really different, what's really the same, and our ideas about how to move forward, and then there's five minutes or whatever number of minutes you have, but it should be no more than five to talk together

as a whole group, whatever size the group is. Typically that conversation in the "all," a very standard is put on "Did something in your group of four (of what you would share with all) did something in your group of four that came out of the interaction from the time of the "1", the "2", the "4", did something so magnificent happen; you know, pop into view that it must be shared with the whole group?"

Amiel: High standard.

Keith: A very high standard, and you should see --

Amiel: Much more than usually in a big group.

Keith: Much more than usually and people think, "Oh, that's so exclusive," or the first time you see that done, it's like -- Well, what that does -- You've just taken -- Let's count up the minutes. It's one minute, two minutes, you know…four; that's seven plus five. Now you've spent twelve minutes. Well, did we get anything fabulous that's going to be spectacular? No, let's spend another twelve minutes on "What are we going to do next?" Just do another round, and it's so counterintuitive that a rapid iterative cycle of that kind. It doesn't try to push toward consensus immediately, would be that productive, but it is. It puts a lot of pressure. It reduces -- Well, it does a lot of things, so maybe I should stop there and any questions about -- You've used it, so you kind of know how it works. Any questions that you have about that?

Amiel: Yeah. Well, I want to clarify. It sounds like you are not telling people to simply say, "Here's what our group agreed on." Is that correct?

Keith: Correct.

Amiel: Because I have seen that happen and you're also not saying "summarize everything." You're saying, "Give me some great stuff." Does whoever is leading the exercise let everyone know that if there's no spectacular or wonderful idea that they'll have a chance to do it again, because I didn't do that when I did it.

Keith: We'll try it next time. You'll see. You don't have to give it an advance. I get this kind of look on my face, or if the group is kind of --   As we're starting into this, the habits need to be broken, and one of the habits are we quickly need to gain consensus in the people with the conventional ideas that usually they win, or their ideas, they're louder or whatever it is, so what I'll do after the round, will get the three or four and of those fabulous ideas that come out the ones that do, once the stuff is out there, I'll go, "Well, is that the peak? Is that the highest peak we can reach or is there anything deeper that we haven't --

Amiel: Yes.

Keith: -- Is there any reason to try again?" If the answer is no, it's good. We've got enough to take the next step, and so the next step could be any number of things, but if it isn't and people admit, "That's a little flat. There's nothing there that's different. I'm not excited about that." Okay. Based on the mediocre stuff that just came out --

Amiel: Yes, if it takes twelve minutes.

Keith: -- let's go another round. Why not?

Amiel: Twelve minutes of your life.

Keith: It takes twelve minute. Yes, and compare that to the tip of old productivity of any meeting really, and it's just laughable how quickly, so the speed of it takes people's breath away and the yield, the quality of what's generated is -- Well, it's up to the group, and I think one of the most interesting things for me is it's pretty hard to tell where the fabulous stuff came from. It's pretty hard to give attribution, and as you're doing this (It sounds like you do this kind of thing, too) is not everybody has to have a good day, right? There's a lot of people. If you do multiple cycles and all the liberating structures kind of do pretty quick cycles, you'll make a contribution in some places and not in others, and so the group, the collective imagination and the collective intelligence of the group, very quickly demonstrates its power in a way that just is very rare with conventional microstructures with presentations and open discussion and brainstorming. It's so obvious that this reveals much more and starts to generate momentum, even so much as -- This is people -- I'm going to say it just because we're there. Many of the decisions that normally get kicked upstairs, you know, and we're waiting for the decision, they just get in this process of 1-2-4-All or multiple cycles of it. A whole bunch of stuff gets handled and this incredible focus on the leaders need to make decisions all of the time, that's a failure --

Amiel: Yes.

Keith: -- of the way we're working together. For me, it hurts. I can barely watch it anymore, and this is 99% -- I can't participate in it. I can barely watch a conventional meeting, a strategy meeting, a staff meeting --

Amiel: It's like kryptonite for you?

Keith: It's any kind of meeting is painful to me how --

Amiel: You lose your powers?

Keith: Well, as it turns out that I need to be there once in a while because that's my work, but once you see the alternative and you know that anybody can do it, it is kryptonite.

Amiel: I'd wondered if we could go to, and I'll invite you to pick another simple liberating structure and folks will see that in the menu, there are thirty-four or thirty-eight (something like that) and they are very simple in the upper left and more complex in the lower right, which I think is helpful because it's how the eye tends to look at the page. Could you pick another of the simpler ones and describe it briefly?

Keith: Probably the -- Well, for sure the most popular liberating structure is called TRIZ and it is named for -- We probably should have changed the name, but it's inspired by a very serious, very complicated Russian engineering approach for designing circuits, or design of anything, and we took one little part out of it called TRIZ, and the purpose of TRIZ is the purpose of 1-2-4-All, so each of these is very clear what they do, so the purpose of 1-2-4-All is to engage everyone simultaneously in generating questions or ideas or suggestions, and TRIZ is designed to stop, identify and then stop counterproductive activities and behaviors to make space for innovation. TRIZ begins -- There are three parts to it, and part one is "Describe the perfect adverse system. How is it that we could create the worst results imaginable?" So, let's take a surgery group. I'll leave names out of this, but it's pretty easy to imagine a surgery group that one of their worst results would be, "We operate on the wrong side of the body every time. How could we…," so a group of people are invited to brainstorm, come up and they use 1-2-4-All to generate a list of the things that they personally could do to operate on the wrong side of the body every time. Now, that's a little risky. You deliver this with a smile on your face and a wink, and they do a round of 1-2-4-All and immediately within a minute, once they're in the 2's and then in the 4's, a riotous laughter starts to unfold in the room, and it's happened everywhere from Mass General in Boston. I did a thing with them on, "How can we be sure that you never change a patient's behavior, that their chronic condition gets worse because you're unable as a clinician to change the health behaviors of your patient, so how could you do that," and immediately in this first round, this first 1-2-4-All, riotous laughter (gallows laughter I call it) because part two of TRIZ is less fun, but also it's quite interesting for people. Okay, given that we've identified all of these things that we could do to be sure we get this worst result.

Part two is, "Well, how many of those do we actually engage in? How much of that do we resemble?" It gets a little quiet, but then there's more laughter. I've been introducing liberating structures to an incredible array of organizations. I'd say 20% will say, "Oh, we do all of those. We do everything that undermines our purpose and moves us toward

that worst result. At least some of the time we do all of those things." I'm like, "Oh, okay."

Then, part three is the most productive part. This is how you eliminate the counterproductive behaviors. You ask each individual of all of those things that you resemble that you're at least doing some of the time, pick one and stop it and decide right now how you're going to stop doing that behavior or that activity, right, and we call this -- It's another liberating structure called "15% Solution," and it's also rarely educed or evoked in a group, or invited for group members to try, which is each individual -- You don't have to ask anybody's permission. This is within your power of 85% of your work life somebody else is kind of controlling, but you always have 15%, so what are your solutions? What part of these activities or behaviors that causes these the worst result we can imagine, what part of that can you stop, and what's your first move? Without making any big management or leadership decisions, a lot of challenges just evaporate because every individual takes responsibility for part of a behavior or an activity that should be stopped and is being stopped by individual action.

Amiel: What happens if you don't point out the 15%/85% and you just ask the question of, "How do we stop this?"

Keith: They'll point directly up at the -- That's somebody else's responsibility. **"**It's not my fault," because it's kind of hard to take in that we are --

Amiel: Sure.

Keith: What was it Pogo used to say? Are you familiar the old Pogo cartoon? "We are the enemy and we are us." It was a really interesting thing and so we're in our own way, and a huge thing here, usually the group assembled are all the people that can. The best is to have all the people that could change things in all the levels or all the diversity of a group of an organization they're there, so if they decide, "Okay, we take responsibility for these results we're getting, we can also stop doing the things that generate those," and the most interesting thing, Amiel, is the moment that the group kind of goes, "Oh, we could stop that," and they start articulating the things they could stop, innovations, really good ideas and passion for them rushes into that space. You can just feel the energy of like, "Okay, I'm going to stop this," but they can't even just stop with the thing they're going to stop with. The new big idea just rushes right in. This is the thing that I find most interesting about TRIZ is – we don't need brainstorming; we don't need a whole bunch of ideas. They could be helpful, but mostly what we need is space to act on the ideas we already have, right? In complexity science, we used to call it chunking – chunk

by chunk. Most innovations are combinations of little things that piece together over time, and so immediately with this space that's created by people stopping the counterproductive behaviors, innovative ideas just rush in right in that moment and I have to stop people – Stop! No, I don't want to hear anything about what you're going to start. Just be sure you stop this. I'm convinced you'll innovate if you stop. If you don't stop any of these things we just talked about, I'm not confident about your progress, and I'll usually -- I get dramatic because I want people to pay attention to this. It's huge. If you can stop these things, you'll immediately be more innovative, so that's what TRIZ is. Very exciting. Very powerful. Quite simple. It uses 1-2-4-All in each of those three segments and it takes usually a half an hour, forty minutes. Once you get the 1-2-4-All, you can play around with the sequencing, but that's how that one works. Was that enough on TRIZ?

Amiel: I'd like to add one comment because one of the things that is very exciting about TRIZ to me is it allows -- Earlier we talked about introverts doing the one thing about the reflecting visual is useful for introverts. Well, TRIZ can be helpful for those of us, and I actually speak personally, who are wired to see worst-case scenarios and understands all the ways that they happen. It gives us a place, a productive place, to contribute and, in fact, get creative. In other words, rather than a bunch of people come up with ideas and then the devil's advocates say, "Alright, here's how that's not going to work;" you're actually saying, "This is the time to talk about the bad news," so that's my comment.

Keith: Yes. When I enter into group -- I do consulting. Anyway, I get into a group and typically somebody will warn me about the curmudgeon.

Amiel: Yes.

Keith: I'm like, "Oh, right. These are my people." There's another -- Our favorite kind of planning methodology or one of the central ones is called eco cycle, and there is the birth of ideas, the maturity, and then every idea becomes rigid, every approach becomes rigid at some point. There's a next phase of that work called creative destruction, and that's pulling apart the beautiful thing that has lived its life and now is no longer producing fruit or no longer productive, and that creative destruction is a key role that you don't learn about in school and the role there – If the birth role is entrepreneur and the mature role is the manager, the creative discretion role of what you're doing is heresy; you're a heretic, and we actually have associated kind of a stance with it and the person who does that is kind of rooted. They're confident enough to say the very thing we develop is no longer functioning. That takes a lot of courage. You have to be really

rooted and confident to do that and really be paying attention to how it is that it needs to be burned down.

Amiel: Yes.

Keith: It's not a popular thing and it's one of the most important things, so we have a place for the curmudgeon. Not the introvert -- See, I'm going to get in trouble here. Not an introvert, I don't think, but the curmudgeon that I can see that this is not working is a key attribute.

Amiel: Yes. Well, the introverted curmudgeon loves the part of the TRIZ that starts with 1.

Keith: Yes.

Amiel: So, there you have that -- And, again, a lot of self-reflective comments here, but that describes me, at least how I'm originally wired. Now, I want to invite you to talk about at least one more, and here I want to describe a situation and ask you which one of these you might use. So, one of the very common situations in the organizations that I work with is that people are having lots of what I would call action conversations where they're trying to make commitments to varying degrees of success or possibility conversations where they're generating ideas using any framework from conventional to 1-2-4-All, but there are relationship conversations where we kind of want to go, "What matters to you, and here's what matters to me and here's what's on my mind," in a sense of let's get to know each other so we can know what kind of future conversations we can actually have together, particularly valuable, people who are new to a team, people who have misunderstood each other, or like across divisions. I imagined there are several of these that would work, but could you pick one liberating structure that you might recommend for a group of people to do this.

Keith: Yeah, I can, and I guess one comment before there. There is a lot of material out there about improving relationships and focusing on individuals and what liberating structures does is focus on the pattern of the related --

Amiel: Yes, relating. Yes.

Keith: -- so because of the change in the pattern, you see the wholeness of each individual, the completeness, much more of your colleague than you thought you knew.

Amiel: Just by doing these. By doing these liberating structures, they will bring them out?

Keith: Oh, everyone, so we really aren't doing -- I'm going to describe one that I think does some spectacular things in regard to the people and how they understand each other, but literally everyone brings more out and it's pretty obvious once you get into it. So, the one I want to talk about is called "What I need from you," and this is the perfect -- It's not one of the first ones you'll do, but as we get better at helping people get started with these; really a novice – somebody in the first couple months of using liberating structures can pull of a good, a really good "What I need from you." You take a challenge that a group is facing. You break into six or seven or eight, at the most, functional groups. I'm just going to use a business example because people know it; like a sales marketing executive, finance or budget people -- Let's say compliance and whatever those groups are, and they are all working; let's say it's a global thing and they aren't even located in the same place, so every quarter they come together and use "What I need from you," and each of these, they have a goal. Let's say their goal is something like enter into ten new markets over the next year, want to expand, and so each of these functional groups sits together and generates a list of the top one, two or three things that they must have to successfully -- From each of the other groups. I'm in sales, what do I need from marketing? I'm in sales, what do I need from the executive? I'm in sales, what do I need from finance? I'm in sales, what do I need from -- So, each of the groups generates the things that they need from each other to achieve this growth goal. They select a leader. It could be their formal leader or someone else to sit in the middle of a huge circle. This can be done with hundreds of people, and the leaders have microphones and they deliver to each other one after another, "This is what I need from you to achieve this goal," so it's across these functions and there can be a whole bunch of things there, and each group writes down what all the other groups have asked from them. No response during this --

Amiel: Just write it down?

Keith: Just write it down. You go back to your group with your list of things that you've been asked for as all the other leaders do, and as a group you decide on an answer, and the answer can only be one of four things, and because the answer can only be one of four things, it cuts through all of the misinformation, the history, lack of clarity. It boils it down to something that's a relatively clear answer that usually takes people's breath away, so the four answers -- When the leader goes back in, they respond with one of these four things: "Yes," which means you're going to get it, what you need. No, which means that isn't something that we can provide to you. "I will try," which means what it sounds like. I didn't really know you needed that; we'll work on it and we'll see if it's possible, and "whatever," which can mean a couple things. Some people water this down a little bit and go "huh," which means what you asked from me is not relevant or I don't

even know what you're talking about, and I'm not going to respond to that. So these answers get distributed and usually what happens in a group is we've never had an honest conversation about what we need from each other to achieve our goal, and literally each function was trying to optimize its own success, but not looking at the larger purpose or larger goal of the organization. It's full of drama, always. There's some number of "whatever's" and "no's," and a lot of "I will try," and you can pretty quickly notice that organization have histories that are filled with disappointment and misunderstanding, and if you're serious about achieving your goals, you need to figure out across these functions; get clear answers on what you need from each other and what you can and cannot provide, and through this, each group, each individual and each group starts to see the possibility of achieving their own goals and the organizational goals. Again, it's a kind of -- This is really where we're starting. This is a real knowledge of okay, where honestly this is where we are at the moment; are we going to take the steps needed to go to the next level, and that is an individual and a group thing. We call that self-discovery in a group, and I think I'm still answering your question.

Amiel: Yes. Yes, I like it, and I'm going to give some thought to this. I might modify the four responses, and I know you encourage people to modify these to their needs to like, "I will get back to you by X date on that," and the "whatever," I assume that you're not supposed to go that tone of "whatever." Or you want that?

Keith: No. I want that.

Amiel: You want that, because that's the drama?

Keith: Yes, it's just like a teenager.

Amiel: Oh, you want them to be like a teenager? Okay.

Keith: Yes. What you've asked me for and I could talk about the Mayo Clinic or the Smithsonian or --

Amiel: And they do that?

Keith: Yes. That's very --

Amiel: So, in other words, you're basically trying to bring out introverts, curmudgeons, and teenagers? Okay. I have another question for you.

Keith: Okay.

Transcribed by Melissa Southerland

Amiel: Usually I would ask people to tell me something, an area that you're attempting to grow. You actually have already written up on this and you have a page on your website of "Things that I am trying to stop doing." I don't know if this is still a current list, but let me ask you about one of them, if I might, and you have seven items and the seventh is "Settling for inadequate space," which means physical space. What have you noticed -- What is the mistake and how have you been trying to get back in the saddle? Is that alright? Is that a fair question? You're free to --

Keith: Yeah, no, no, no. It's good. I'm just thinking about the right example.

Amiel: Okay.

Keith: Well, the most dramatic one. Business school, top -- If I mentioned the name, it would be a top business school. You'd know it immediately, and so they want to use one of the liberating structures. I'm coaching somebody who has been through a workshop, 750 people or -- In one of these steep lecture hall things where all the seats are -- So, the activity that they want to do is called 25/10 crowd-sourcing, which anonymously everybody writes on a card if they were ten times bolder, what would they do? What strategy? What would be the thing they would do, and then you do five rounds of sorting the cards, moving around the space, sometimes playing music and sort the cards, stop; everybody reads the card in front of them, decides if it's a five, "I'm in. I want to do that. I love that idea," to a one, "That's fine for somebody else. I don't care about them." It's best -- It's great if everybody can move around in an open space, look at each other so I'll compromise. I don't want to compromise, but okay, you guys want to do this, it's a business school in this space, is anybody going to fall down the stairs? So, they did it. They accomplished the goal. They got a top ten of the boldest ideas for this. This was about sustainable green business – "How can we advance a green (I'm summarizing here)"-- A sustainable green enterprise and the B Corp and all that kind of really cool stuff. So that's the kind of thing where I know I can compromise. I actually want to change the structure of the architecture of most organizations.

Henri and I, we walked into Paris and their beautiful organization. One of the rooms that we needed to work in for a couple things had this walnut table. It covered like 80% of the room and the first thing Henri said walking in, "Can we like get a chainsaw and cut this thing up and get it out of this room now," and the look on the CEO's face was like offended, but also how can you possibly -- Of course, he had great reasons for it, so when I fall off the horse, I need to stop with this because you can see what the potential to make progress, to be more productive. It stings a little bit every time that you compromise and you say, "Well, well, we'll work with that space." You still can get

somewhere, but most of the time we want very flexible space in which all the diverse views that people combine and recombine so that all of the views get heard. We want the difference to be brought out and come together and the space -- It's easy to go, "Well, those tables were already in the room. We'll work with those tables." We want ultimately a very flexible space, so that's always what I'm thinking about. There's always an ideal and I'll compromise when I have to, but I let people know this could be more powerful if we weren't in a lecture room with six chairs and a steep room.

Amiel: Yeah. I'm going to include a link in the show notes to Keith's Stop Doing List, which has fourteen items, "What I have stopped doing," and then a column to the right, "What I have substituted." I think it's a brilliant example, and I'm actually going to create one of these myself. One last very short question before you -- What is it called, climb tall buildings? What does Super Man do? I'm trying to keep the metaphor going. Fast as a speeding bullet, yeah?

Keith: Yes.

Amiel: You describe what Henri does to you when you're in your old habits. I don't remember you saying what you did to him, and I think he's more senior than you. He's an older guy, right, so I was just curious, do you do the same thing to him, stand in front of him and look at his eyes or pat him on the back, or do you have something different?

Keith: I don't know if I should say this. What do I do? Yeah, well, I know some things that I don't want to say.

Amiel: Do you want to decline to answer?

Keith: Well, see, then he would know what I do.

Amiel: Oh, I see. Okay, well, in that case, let's keep it a secret between Keith and Keith. That's awesome. See, that actually is a better -- That is better than anything that you actually know and it works.

Keith: Most of the time. Most of the time. I recommend that --

Amiel: So, listeners out there -- Yes?

Keith: I recommend that if you get a chance to chat with Henri, he's a terrific interview.

Amiel: Well, I would love to. I would love to. I will shoot you a note about that and, Keith, thanks so much for a really awesome conversation and there's a lot more to learn here.

Keith: Well, I'm happy to do it. It's really fun for me, and I'd love to see your "stop doing" list and I'm happy to keep in touch with you about how you're adapting liberating structures. That's what they are. They are to be localized, to be adapted to settings, and they're all creative comments. We're not trying to copyright anything. This is really for everyone, so lovely, lovely to talk with you.

Amiel: Yes, thanks so much! Have a good Pacific Northwest afternoon.

Keith: Yes. Good. Okay, take care! Bye, bye.

Amiel: Okay. Take care. Bye, bye.