



**THE ART OF
GATHERING**

HOW WE

MEET AND

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PRIYA PARKER



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Don't Be a Chill Host

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Now you know how to craft a bold and clear purpose for your gathering and how to close doors based on it. The next step is to think about your role as host. How will you run your gathering?

"CHILL" IS SELFISHNESS DISGUISED AS KINDNESS

When I raise the question of the host's role to clients or friends, whether in preparation for business meetings or family get-togethers, I am often greeted with hesitancy. This is because to talk about their role is to talk about their power as a host, and to talk about that power is to acknowledge that it exists. This is not what most people want to hear. Many people who go to the serious trouble of hosting aspire to host as minimally as possible.

But who wants to sail on a skipperless ship? Time and again,

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as in the case of S., who was debating whether to do more with her dinner party, I urge those I advise to own their power and lift a hand to the wheel. Time and again, they resist.

I once was in Washington, D.C., helping organize a meeting about poverty policy with a group of federal and state leaders. The hosts took my suggestion to hold an intimate, single-conversation dinner the night before the meeting, to give participants a chance to bond. The idea was for them to go deep, take risks, and even shift their mindsets to make their policy deliberations the following day more human.

After it was planned, one of the state leaders couldn't make the dinner but wanted to attend the meeting the next day. I strongly urged that the organizers say no. The dinner wasn't an aside; it was a core part of the design of the gathering. The full group would have bonded, creating the potential for an entirely different, more generative dynamic for the meeting. Then one person who didn't go through that process would show up a day late and affect the entire group by her unchanged mindset. The four organizers, averse to conflict and worried about upsetting an important leader, resisted my advice. They wanted to let the state leader decide. Finally, the senior woman in charge listened to me and told the state leader: You are welcome at both parts of the gathering or neither part. She attended neither. After the dinner, seeing the shift that had occurred in the group through the meaningful personal conversation that evening, the organizers understood why it would have then been disruptive to bring in an uninitiated member the next morning.

On another occasion, I was at a housewarming party on a rooftop in Brooklyn. After dinner, the gathering had hit a lull,

with people milling around, debating whether to leave or stay. I sensed this, and suggested to the hosts a game of Werewolf, a dynamic, intense group game invented by a Russian psychology professor that could bond the seated guests, reverse the tide of ebbing energy, and spice up the night. One of the hosts seemed eager to play the game and give the group a focus. She looked around and saw some of her guests eager as well, and a small handful with skeptical looks on their faces. The skepticism of this minority intimidated her, and she abandoned the idea, not comfortable using her power as host to bring them along. It was less a risk to do nothing. The moment passed, people broke up into smaller groups, and we lost the critical mass. The next day, she texted me that she wished we had played.

A journalist I know went to the trouble of gathering a dozen peers for a ten-year reunion of their time as foreign correspondents. People came from out of town to attend the dinner at a Thai restaurant in New York City. The journalist is someone who had taken my advice in the past. And so, of his own accord, he decided that he wanted at some point in the evening to interrupt the sidebar conversations and invite everyone to reflect on what that time abroad had meant to them. He wanted to create a moment of focus that would activate the evening's intended purpose. But at the last minute, he backed down, fearing that the idea would be too domineering, or too earnest, or both.

A ubiquitous strain of twenty-first-century culture is infecting our gatherings: being chill. The desire to host while being noninvasive.

"Chill" is the idea that it's better to be relaxed and low-key, better not to care, better not to make a big deal. It is, in the words

of Alana Massey's essay "Against Chill," a "laid-back attitude, an absence of neurosis." It "presides over the funeral of reasonable expectations." It "takes and never gives."

Let me declare my bias outright: Chill is a miserable attitude when it comes to hosting gatherings.

In this chapter, I want to convince you to assume your proper powers as a host. That doesn't mean that there's one way to host or one kind of power to exert over your gathering. But I do believe that hosting is inevitably an exercise of power. The hosts I guide often feel tempted to abdicate that power, and feel that by doing so they are letting their guests be free. But this abdication often fails their guests rather than serves them. The chill approach to hosting is all too often about hosts attempting to wriggle out of the burden of hosting. In gatherings, once your guests have chosen to come into your kingdom, they want to be governed—gently, respectfully, and well. When you fail to govern, you may be elevating how you want them to perceive you over how you want the gathering to go for them. Often, chill is you caring about *you* masquerading as you caring about *them*.

THE PROBLEM WITH CHILL

Behind the ethic of chill hosting lies a simple fallacy: Hosts assume that leaving guests alone means that the guests will be left alone, when in fact they will be left to one another. Many hosts I work with seem to imagine that by refusing to exert any power in their gathering, they create a power-free gathering. What they fail to realize is that this pulling-back, far from purging a gathering of power, creates a vacuum that others can fill. Those others

are likely to exercise power in a manner inconsistent with your gathering's purpose, and exercise it over people who signed up to be at your—the host's—mercy, but definitely didn't sign up to be at the mercy of your drunk uncle.

Isn't a host who lets people make their own fun, talk to whomever they want to, the most generous kind of host? One of the most dramatic and convincing rebuttals to that possible objection took place in a classroom.

Ronald Heifetz is a popular professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and a well-known authority on leadership. On the first day of his class on Adaptive Leadership, he begins in the most peculiar way. Instead of walking into the room and taking attendance or launching into a lecture, he sits in a black swivel chair in the front of the classroom and stares at the ground with a blank, slightly bored look on his face. Dozens of students sit in front of him. He doesn't welcome any of them. He doesn't clear his throat. He doesn't have one of his assistants introduce him. He just sits there in silence, staring blankly, not moving an inch.

The students sit expectantly, waiting. The official start time of the class passes, and Heifetz continues to sit there, not saying a word. The silence grows heavier, more nerve-racking. By doing nothing, he is abdicating his command of the classroom, refusing to play the expected role of professor-host—presumably, in his case, given his area of scholarship, for some reason we students do not yet grasp.

You can feel the collective nervousness growing by the second. One person laughs. Somebody else coughs. There is a general, unspoken confusion among the students. They are disoriented. When the professor, the traditional classroom authority, doesn't

play his role, he removes the guardrails of the classroom. The students are left to navigate the treacherous road themselves.

Someone finally speaks, saying (as best I remember it): "I think this is the class?"

With that, a popcornlike conversation, slow and measured at first, then gathering pace and fervor, breaks out among roughly one hundred strangers:

"Is he just going to sit there?"

"I don't have all day."

"No, I think this is the point."

"So what should we do?"

"Shhhh . . . Maybe he's getting ready to speak."

"Don't shush me. I have every right to talk."

Without the professor leading the way, the students must deal with one another. Any of the hundred of them is, technically, free to speak (or yell or dance or laugh or attempt to take charge). No one is stopping them. But there are unspoken norms discouraging them from doing so. And even when those norms are put to the test, as Heifetz is doing by hanging back, each student has no idea how the others will react. Will one of them be strong enough, charismatic enough, or logical enough to convince the others what to do with the time? Or will they endlessly argue?

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.

AUTHORITY IS AN ONGOING COMMITMENT

As hosts of gatherings, clients and friends of mine sometimes agree to take charge. Their instinct is usually to do so once, early on in the gathering, perhaps by giving an overview of the agenda, or by leading a discussion about group norms, or by going over a set of instructions for a group game. Then, as far as they are concerned, their work is done. Having done their "hosting," they can pretend to be guests.

But exercising your authority once and early on in a gathering is as effective as exercising your body once and early on in your life. It isn't enough just to set a purpose, direction, and ground rules. All these things require enforcement. And if you don't enforce them, others will step in and enforce their own purposes, directions, and ground rules.

I once attended a dinner thrown by one of the more purposeful hosts I know. She seated her dozen or so guests around the table and then suggested we get to know one another by guessing one another's occupations. She had seen it done at another gathering and thought it was fun. We were game. She explained how it worked: Everyone at the table gets a guess (unless you know the person), and then the person says what he or she does for a living. We plunged in, making rather hilarious speculations about the first person as he tried to maintain his poker face.

With the game off to a good start, as the guests seemed to find

comfort and laughter in one another, the host got up to get dinner ready. She must have felt that her work was done: Her gathering was on autopilot now. Leaving put her only ten or so paces from the table; it wasn't as though she had deserted us. But even this distance—more psychic than physical, since she was now focused on something else and only faintly following the game—created a problem. One of the guests, perhaps sensing the vacuum or perhaps doing what he always does, began to suck up a disproportionate amount of attention. He gave himself several guesses for each person instead of the allotted one, and when that infraction went unticketed, he began to ask follow-up questions to the guests after they revealed their occupation.

The host's (totally understandable) abdication had made space for a pretender to the throne. Thanks to this pretender, we spent forty minutes on just the first two people. It was completely unsustainable as a pace, and not very interesting. The problem was that no one was invested in the game or its rules besides the host. No one had even heard of the game before. When the host set the game in motion and left, there was no one at the table to enforce the game's rules or the norms of brevity and equality that made it work. But there was *someone* willing to enforce *something*—in this case, a guest willing to enforce his own idea that the rest of the group would benefit from hanging back a little and letting him conduct. He was wrong.

The man's casual evening oppression is the perfect illustration of an old quote from the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin: "Freedom for the wolves has often meant death to the sheep."

What ensued that evening was what so often happens when hosts fail to exert their authority and to enforce it as an ongoing commitment: Many guests get irritated. Some spoke up and,

without explicitly maligning the man or the exercise, suggested that we move on and just talk. That was a good suggestion, but other guests were equally right in pointing out that this approach wouldn't be fair, since some people had now been elaborately introduced to the group and others remained unknown. Even after retaking her seat, the host laid low. We spent the entire night on the exercise. People were grumbling throughout—grumbling being the preferred weapon of guests who feel poorly governed and unprotected by their host.

So remember, if you're going to compel people to gather in a particular way, enforce it and rescue your guests if it fails.

And the next time you host a gathering and feel tempted to abdicate even a little, examine the impulse. What is compelling you to hang back? If it's something logistical (like the need to heat up food or to step out and take a call), you might find that a willing guest is much happier to get assigned to play temporary "host" than to be oppressed by some friend of yours for the better part of a night. Often, though, something deeper is at work: a reluctance that you convince yourself is generous.

It's not just with strangers at a dinner party that hosts abdicate their power. I once advised a company that was suffering from painful quarterly meetings because of a misunderstanding of generosity. Three-hour meetings would turn into seven-hour marathons without anyone's explicit consent. Agendas would be built, only to be thrown out the window once the executives actually gathered. The meetings would be diverted to one or two topics that a few felt passionately enough about to advocate for in the moment, and the rest didn't feel passionately enough about to protest.

There was ostensibly an executive who was supposed to run

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these meetings. But the problem was that the entire company was based on the core value of equality. This executive would begin most meetings by going over the agenda, but then, like our dinner host, hope the rest would take care of itself. While the meetings might start on topic, inevitably one of the executives would have a burning issue he or she would want to discuss, and in trying to be generous to that peer, the host wouldn't enforce the agenda. And no one else would either, in part because the others didn't think they could if they were "equals." Quarter after quarter, the participants left meetings frustrated, having made few substantive decisions or pushed any agenda forward. And though he was telling himself he was governing in a generous manner, the host was also protecting himself. His underlying belief was that in the current setup, even if the group was collectively worse off for it, it did him no favors to rein in his fiercer colleagues. With no source of enforcement, the meetings became dominated by informal sources of power: tenure at the company, professional success, force of personality.

Is your laissez-faire approach really doing your guests the favor you imagine it is? Does your agenda-free meeting help the young analyst? Or does her chance of adding something useful to a discussion among seasoned experts depend on her being able to prepare in advance? Does your talk-to-whomever-you-want approach help the quiet guest speak at all if not given a protected turn? Does open seating at a teachers conference help the three newcomers who end up sitting clumped together at the end of the table every time?

An essential step along the path of gathering better is making peace with the necessity and virtue of using your power. If you

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

THE WONDERS OF GENEROUS AUTHORITY

At this point you may be wondering: If I am to rule my gathering, what kind of ruler should I be?

The kinds of gatherings that meaningfully help others are governed by what I call generous authority. A gathering run on generous authority is run with a strong, confident hand, but it is run selflessly, for the sake of others. Generous authority is imposing in a way that serves your guests. It spares them from the chaos and anxiety that Heifetz knowingly thrust upon his students. It spares them from the domination of some guests by other guests that the dinner host unwittingly enabled. It wards off pretenders who threaten a purpose. Sometimes generous authority demands a willingness to be disliked in order to make your guests have the best experience of your gathering.

But what does generous authority look like in the practice of gathering?

Generous authority is Richard Saul Wurman, the founder of the TED conference, walking onstage in Monterey, California, holding a pair of scissors. He walked toward Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the MIT Media Lab, a speaker, friend, and longtime attendee who, despite his familiarity with its norms, had violated its policy forbidding neckties by wearing one that

day. Generous authority, in service of the larger gathering and its values, compelled Wurman to approach Negroponte before he could start his talk and theatrically cut off much of his tie. Which he did.

Generous authority is the comedian Amy Schumer facing down a heckler at a comedy show—hecklers being a perfect example of those pretender authorities waiting to rule if the host shows any weakness. Someone yelled a non sequitur from the audience, “Where’d you get your boots?” Schumer hit the heckler back hard: “On the corner of You Can’t Afford Them and Stop Talking to Me.” She was funny, but she was also implicitly using her power to prevent one heckler from ruining the show for others.

Generous authority is Daisy Medici’s arduous effort to equalize who gets to speak when wealthy families get together to make decisions and plans. Medici is a financial adviser (with a very good name for a financial adviser) who facilitates when the patriarchs and matriarchs of moneyed families convene their extended tribes for what are often difficult conversations. Generous authority is Medici’s awareness—and gentle counterbalancing—of the tendency of in-laws often to stay silent, deferring to the blood relatives, and of the elders to edge out their adult children, even though it is those children who will live with the consequences of, say, selling off a family business or giving money away.

Generous authority is not a pose. It’s not the appearance of power. It is using power to achieve outcomes that are generous, that are for others. The authority is justified by the generosity. When I tell you to host with generous authority, I’m not telling you to domineer. I’m saying to find the courage to be authoritative in the service of three goals.

PROTECT YOUR GUESTS

The first and perhaps most important use of your authority is the protection of your guests. You may need to protect your guests from one another, or from boredom, or from the addictive technologies that lurk in our pockets, vibrating away. We usually feel bad saying no to someone. But it can become easier when we understand who and what we are protecting when we say no.

When it comes to using our power to protect guests, we could learn from the Alamo Drafthouse, a movie theater chain founded in Austin, Texas, with locations now in several cities. How many times have you been in a movie theater, trying to watch the show, and one or two rows behind you are people loudly stage-whispering to each other? Or the person next to you takes out their phone and the radiating white light competes with the big screen? How bad does it have to get for you to say something? Perhaps you say something and nothing happens. Perhaps you say something and a conflict breaks out, ruining the movie for even greater numbers of people.

What sets the Alamo apart, in addition to its large seats and its food and beverage service during the show, is that it practices generous authority. Most movie theaters, like so many hosts, focus primarily on their own host-guest relationship, overlooking the audience’s internal relationships: that of guest to guest. The Alamo does not make this mistake. Someone there seems to have realized that other theaters outsource the role of enforcer to their patrons, which is a role a paying customer should not have to play. And so when you watch a film at the Alamo, you see an

announcement that warns you not to text or talk during the show, which many theaters have. But here's the clincher: If you do, you will get one warning by the staff. If you do it a second time, you will "be ejected." And if you, as a customer, see another customer breaking one of the rules, you can simply put up your "order card" at your table and the theater will take care of it. (Customers also write down food orders on the same card to signal the waiter, so the anonymity of the snitch is safe.) The waiters deliver on the promise by serving as enforcers. I can attest that they do their job.

When one guest was kicked out for texting, she left an angry voicemail on the theater's machine: "I've texted in all the other theaters in Austin and no one ever gave a fuck." She continued, "You guys, obviously, were being assholes to ME." She went on and on, ending with "And I'm pretty sure you're being an asshole on purpose. So thanks for making me feel like a customer! Thanks for taking my money, asshole!"

The Alamo, confident in the generosity of its authority, revealed in the message. The company turned the voicemail into an advertisement. It ended with the words "Thanks for not coming back to the Alamo, TEXTER!" The ad went viral. The company's CEO, Tim League, explained the company's policy and strict enforcement of it: "When you are in a cinema, you are one of many, many people in the auditorium. When the lights go dark and the movie begins, every single movie fan in the room wants to be absorbed into and get lost in the flickering images on the screen. A light from a cellphone, a screaming baby or a disruptive teen cracking jokes all pull you out of the magic of the movies. Providing an awesome experience for true movie fans is the reason we

opened the first Alamo Drafthouse back in the mid-'90s, and it is the exact same philosophy we adhere to today."

What sets the Alamo apart from other theaters is not the fact that it has a no-talking and no-texting policy. It is, rather, that it pledges in a detailed way to enforce those policies and that its employees faithfully do. And the Alamo is willing to face the wrath of its guests. Its employees use their authority to protect the other guests and the larger purpose of their gathering. The Alamo, contrary to the texter's voicemail rant, isn't "being an asshole on purpose." Rather, it is working to protect the purpose of the gathering: to enjoy the magic of the movies.

The theater has created a separate program, Alamo for All, where it lifts the noise and technology rules entirely and allows people to move around during the movie. The theater hosts these film experiences to serve a different purpose: to create a radically inclusive, accessible movie theater for children (including crying babies) and guests with special needs. Because the Alamo knows the needs of some patrons can be at odds with those of others, it has created two separate gatherings that serve two separate purposes: one to protect its guests from noise and distraction, the other to protect its guests from exclusion and inaccessibility.

To protect your guests in this way can be challenging, because the anger of the shushed is concentrated, while the gratitude of the protected is diffuse. Anyone who has ever moderated a panel—that most lamentable of gatherings—knows the feeling. But very talented moderators like David Gergen, the CNN political commentator and consigliere to many American presidents—get used to the idea of taking one for the team, even if the team doesn't even realize what is being done on their behalf. When

Gergen hosts a panel and Q&A time comes, he often instructs the audience: “If you would, identify yourself, be fairly succinct, and remember that a question ends with a question mark.” When an audience member inevitably begins making a long statement, Gergen interrupts repeatedly if need be: “Can you put that into a question? . . . Can you put that into a question? . . . Is this leading to a question?” It may seem to some that he is being mean, but in fact he is protecting the rest of the audience who waited or paid to hear from the head of state or a famous author or a political activist, not a fellow audience member.

That is protecting your guests: anticipating and intercepting people’s tendencies when they’re not considering the betterment of the whole of the group or the experience. The questioner at a panel who makes a statement often doesn’t realize that she is making a statement, as odd as that might seem. The relentless self-promoter at a cocktail party probably wouldn’t sound the way he does if he could hear himself. People aren’t setting out to be bad people at your gatherings; bad behavior happens. But it’s your job as a host—kindly, graciously, but firmly—to ward it off.

A few years ago, Elizabeth Stewart realized that she would have no choice but to step up in this way. She was the founding director of Impact Hub Los Angeles, which is part business incubator and part community center. Even though the organization she ran was about the growing of businesses and the nurturing of entrepreneurs, Stewart knew “that we had to guard against the transactional relationships that permeated the start-up coworking spaces.” She continued, “I knew we had to be different through ground rules and setting up norms that supported something different.” So Stewart introduced a rule in all Hub LA membership orientations: Members could only talk about what

they “sold” if someone asked for help or asked about what they did. She was protecting her guests from being seen only as potential customers or investors and protecting the gathering from becoming crass. “It had to be about people getting to know each other as people first and foremost and sharing their ideas second. That’s where the rule came from. We tried to create a culture that was sensitive to inquiry and invitation,” she said.

Protecting your guests doesn’t have to consist of loud interruptions or fierce rules. It can be done through small, almost unnoticeable interventions that happen throughout a gathering: rescuing a guest from a long, one-sided conversation in the corner of your party; shutting down a domineering employee at work with a joke; asking someone to stop texting.

Protecting your guests is, in short, about elevating the right to a great collective experience above anyone’s right to ruin that experience. It’s about being willing to be a bad cop, even if it means sticking your neck out. And it’s generous, because you’re doing it for your guests so that, as at the Alamo Drafthouse, they don’t have to.

EQUALIZE YOUR GUESTS

Another vital use of a host’s authority is to temporarily equalize your guests. In almost any human gathering there will be some hierarchy, some difference in status, imagined or real, whether between a sales vice president and a new associate at an all-hands meeting or between a teacher and a parent at back-to-school night. Most gatherings benefit from guests leaving their titles and degrees at the door. However, the coat check for their pretenses is you. If you don’t hang them up, no one else will.