

gather, we too often use a template of gathering (what we assume a gathering should look like) to substitute for our thinking. The art of gathering begins with purpose: When should we gather? And why?

A CATEGORY IS NOT A PURPOSE

Think back to the last several gatherings you hosted or attended. A networking event. A book club. A volunteer training. If I were to ask you (or your host) the purpose behind each of those gatherings, I wouldn't be surprised to hear what I often do in my work: what you were supposed to *do* at the gathering.

That networking night, you might tell me, was intended to help people in similar fields meet one another.

The book club was organized to get us to read a book together.

The volunteer training was arranged to train the volunteers.

The purpose of your church's small group was to allow church members to meet in smaller groups.

This is the circular logic that guides the planning of many of our gatherings.

"What's wrong with that?" you might say. Isn't the purpose of a networking night to network? Yes, to a point. But if that's all it is, it will likely proceed like so many other networking nights: people wandering

around and awkwardly passing out their business cards, practicing their elevator pitches on anyone with a pulse who'll listen. It will likely not dazzle anyone. It may even make some guests feel awkward or insecure—and swear off future networking nights.

When we don't examine the deeper assumptions behind *why* we gather, we end up skipping too quickly to replicating old, staid formats of gathering. And we forgo the possibility of creating something memorable, even transformative.

For example, in planning that networking night, what if the organizers paused to ask questions like these: Is our purpose for this gathering to help people find business partners or clients? Is the purpose to help guests sell their wares or to get advice on the weaker parts of their product? Is the purpose of the night to help as many people from different fields make as many new connections as possible, or to build a tribe that would want to meet again? The answers to these questions should lead to very different formats of an evening.

When we gather, we often make the mistake of conflating category with purpose. We outsource our decisions and our assumptions about our gatherings to people, formats, and contexts that are not our own. We get lulled into the false belief that knowing the category of the gathering—the board meeting, workshop, birthday party, town hall—will be instructive to designing it.

But we often choose the template—and the activities and structure that go along with it—before we're clear on our purpose. And we do this just as much for gatherings that are as low stakes as a networking night as for gatherings that are as high stakes as a court trial.

The Red Hook Community Justice Center, located in Brooklyn, New York, set out to reimagine one of the more intimidating gatherings in public life: the court proceeding. Founded in 2000, in the wake of a crisis, in a neighborhood struggling with poverty and crime, the center wanted to change the relationship between the community and law enforcement. Its founders wondered if it was possible to invent a new kind of justice system that would cure the ailments that a crime revealed instead of just locking up criminals.

The judge who would come to preside over Red Hook's experiment, Alex Calabrese, once described himself as having two options under the traditional justice system: "It was either prosecute or dismiss." Even judges who recognized the problems with the system didn't have much freedom to break out of this paradigm. And so a small group of organizers concluded that, in order to change how the justice system functioned in Red Hook, they would need to invent a new kind of gathering. To do so, they would have to ask themselves a basic question: What is the purpose of the justice system we want to

see? And what would a court look like if it were built according to that purpose?

A traditional courtroom is adversarial. That is a design that derives from its own very worthy purpose: surfacing the truth by letting the parties haggle over it. But the organizers behind the Red Hook Community Justice Center were motivated by a different purpose. Would it be possible to use a courtroom to get everyone involved in a case—the accused, judges, lawyers, clerks, social workers, community members—to help improve behavior instead of merely punish it? “We take a problem-solving approach to the cases that come before us,” said Amanda Berman, the Justice Center’s project director and a former public defender in the Bronx. “When we’re presented with a case—whether it’s a housing-court case, a criminal-court case, or a family-court case—the question we are asking at the end of the day is, what is the problem, and how can we work together to come to a solution?”

This new purpose required the design of a new kind of courtroom. A traditional courtroom, built for surfacing the truth adversarially, was constructed to make the judge seem intimidating. It separated the prosecutors from the defense counsel. It featured grim-faced jailers and sympathetic social workers and psychologists. Everyone had their role. Even the décor reinforced the purpose. “Traditional courtrooms often utilize dark

woods, conveying a message of gravity, judgment, and power,” Berman said.

The experimental courtroom in Red Hook was created along very different lines. Set up in an abandoned parochial school in the heart of the neighborhood, the court has windows to let the sun in, light-colored wood, and an unusual judge’s bench. “The planners chose to build the bench at eye level so that the judge could have these personal interactions with litigants coming before him, invite them up to the bench, which he loves to do, so that people could see that he is not looking down on them, both literally and figuratively,” Berman said.

Calabrese is the judge. His experimental courtroom has jurisdiction over three police precincts that used to send cases to three different courts—civil court, family court, and criminal court—and now sends many to Calabrese. He personally presides over every case that comes in, taking the time to get to know its history and players. In many cases, a defendant is assigned a social worker, who does a full clinical assessment of the accused to figure out the bigger picture of his or her life. This holistic assessment—which can take place even prior to the initial court appearance—includes looking for substance abuse, mental health issues, trauma, domestic violence, and other factors. This assessment is then shared with the judge, the district attorney, and the defense. At the proceeding itself, Calabrese behaves more

like a strict, caring uncle than a traditional judge. He verifies the details of the case and checks errors in front of the defendants. He takes the time to address each individual personally, often shaking their hand as they approach the bench. He explains their situation to them carefully: “The fine print says if you don’t come through, they will come and evict you, and no one wants to see that happen, so I’ve written ‘12/30’ in big numbers on the top of the page.” You have the sense that the people here are rooting for defendants and litigants to get their lives in order. It’s not uncommon for Calabrese to praise a defendant who has shown progress. “Obviously, this is a good result for you. It’s also a great result for the community, and I’d like to give you a round of applause,” he might say. And then you see everyone, even the police officers, applauding.

Under the rules of this special court, Judge Calabrese has available to him a diverse toolkit of possible interventions. In addition to traditional prison time, which he metes out when need be, he has the ability to evaluate each individual defendant and, based on both the clinical assessment and his own judgment of the situation, assign community service, drug treatment, mental health services, trauma counseling, family mediation, and so on. Still, sometimes he concludes that jail is the only option. “We give them every reasonable chance, plus two. So when I do have to send them to jail, it tends to be

for twice as long as they might ordinarily get,” Calabrese told *The New York Times*.

The Justice Center is starting to see some tangible results. [According to independent evaluators](#), it reduced the recidivism rate of adult defendants by 10 percent and of juvenile defendants by 20 percent. Only 1 percent of the cases processed by the Justice Center result in jail at arraignment. [“I have been in the justice system](#) for twenty years,” Calabrese says in a documentary film about the center, “and I finally feel that I have a chance to really get to the problem that causes the person to come in front of me.” The Justice Center team has been able to do this because they figured out the larger purpose of why they wanted to gather: they wanted to solve the community’s problems—together. And they built a proceeding around that.

Like all repeated gatherings, the Justice Center is a work in progress. The participants, Berman said, are constantly “making sure that we are remaining true to our mission. This is supposed to be a laboratory and a model. It’s supposed to be a different way of doing things. And a better way of doing things.”

Thinking of the place as a laboratory frees the people at the Justice Center to be great gatherers. “There are no lines in our head about how we should gather or what it needs to look like,” Berman told me. “Every case and every client is looked at individually.” This attitude al-

lows them to separate their assumptions of what a court proceeding *should* look like from what a proceeding *could* look like. We can use the same mindset to begin reexamining our own purposes for gathering.

And it's not just in public gatherings like courtrooms where we follow traditional formats of gathering unquestioningly. A category can masquerade as a purpose just as easily, if not more so, in our personal gatherings, particularly those that have become ritualized over time. Thanks to ancient traditions and modern Pinterest boards, it's easy to overlook the step of choosing a vivid purpose for your personal gathering. Just as many of us assume we know what a trial is for, so we think we know what a birthday party is for, or what a wedding is for, or even what a dinner party is for. And so our personal gatherings tend not to serve the purposes that they could. When you skip asking yourself what the purpose of your birthday party is in *this* specific year, for where you are at this present moment in your life, for example, you forsake an opportunity for your gathering to be a source of growth, support, guidance, and inspiration tailored to the time in which you and others find yourselves. You squander a chance for your gathering to help, and not just amuse, you and others. Looking back, that's what I did when I barred my husband from my baby shower.