

Story of AoPL in the European Commission

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when the practice of hosting was first seeded in the European Commission, but it's been brewing since late 2006, when the first World Café conversations were hosted at a Commission-wide learning day. In retrospect, it is astonishing to see how much of what has happened since was already intimated in those first conversations.

Since then, over 700 members of staff coming from all levels of hierarchy and all departments have been through a 3-day training seminar (we call it the Art of Participatory Leadership because that's slightly easier for people to understand, but it's based on the Art of Hosting). Hundreds of meetings and events have been hosted using made-for-purpose processes, ranging from unit meetings, staff-engagement exercises and team-building events for whole Directorates-General to large-scale stakeholder engagement processes with representatives of different professions and economic sectors from all over Europe. Feedback from participants is invariably positive – people are reassured to know that the European Commission is open to working in these innovative and participatory ways. Some stakeholders are inspired to take the approach home with them and apply it in their context.

Typically, hosting teams consist of members of operational units, trained hosts from other Commission departments and seasoned external 'consultants' invited from among the stewards of the global AoH community. There is a growing community of in-house practitioners, and at the same time, the dividing line between inside and outside is growing ever fainter as more gatherings are convened across organisational boundaries in service of cross-cutting challenges that don't stop at the gates to the organisation. Global stewards are generously offering their time to reflect with in-house practitioners on how this work could develop further in service of Europe. As the community broadens and deepens, we are consistently witnessing people's development accelerate, both as individuals and as leaders and team members.

Bringing the principles of self-organisation and peer-to-peer practice into a traditional hierarchical bureaucracy which is both multilingual and multicultural has not been easy and obstacles abound. Some view the whole phenomenon as some kind of ominous sect, or misunderstand the approach as 'spiritual' and run in the opposite direction. Even finding suitable meeting rooms can be an insurmountable challenge in a context where architecture reflects the 'one-to-many' mode of communication favoured by top-down management. It can be hard to wed the two approaches seamlessly to ensure that input from participatory processes is not squashed and distorted by traditional, more 'patriarchal' management practices.