



Beyond the Turkey

By Maya Bernstein & Rae Ringel

“Don't begin a funeral with logistics,” warns Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering*; and we would like to add, “and don't focus your Thanksgiving meal on a turkey.” As facilitators, and teachers of facilitation, we believe that when people gather together in any context, whether it be a ten-minute meeting or a festive Thanksgiving meal, there is an opportunity for transformation. The phenomenon of human beings breathing, eating, and interacting in the same physical space is an increasingly rare and unique opportunity to create meaningful connections, and to touch people's hearts and minds. The feelings that derive from a well-designed, emotionally resonant experience fuel all relationships, and often the majority of our behavior. So, let's not waste it on the turkey.

If you are like us, Thanksgiving preparation involves a lot of thinking about food. Sweet potatoes (we're partial to marshmallows on top), cranberry sauce, stuffing, Brussel sprouts, turkey, tofurkey; we spend so much time planning menus, preparing recipes, and thinking about the meal (and how we're going to strategically beat traffic to get there). Often, what we actively avoid thinking about, or grumble about to friends, is the stress of being with certain family members, or how an uncle's politics will derail the entire day, or how this relative doesn't get along with that relative. Sometimes we throw an “activity” into the meal (other than eating and football watching); it rarely receives the amount of attention and preparation it deserves.

Professionally, we dedicate much of our time to leading gatherings or teaching others how to hone their art and craft of facilitation. A foundational piece of facilitations is the design – all of the things you do before you even walk into the room and sit down at the table. It is essentially the recipe preparation – menu planning, shopping, table arrangements – for the human interaction side of the experience. What would it look like to take this part of the Thanksgiving experience as seriously as the food? What might it involve?

We would like to offer you a core element of best practice in the design of gatherings to help you elevate your Thanksgiving experience off the table and into people's hearts. It's as simple as A,B,C...

When preparing for any meeting, speech, training session, or, yes, family gathering, you must first answer three basic questions:

A – “Affective” – How do I want people to feel as a result of this gathering? Empowered, included, motivated, connected, appreciated? Or might there be a fire you want to light to create a sense of productive discomfort?

B – “Behavioral” – What do I want them to be able to do at the end of the experience? How is their behavior going to be different as a result of this? Stay in close touch throughout the year, or be more open and vulnerable when together? Address difficult parts of the past? Or simply gather more often?

C – “Cognitive” – What do I want them to understand? What new things will they learn? Something new about your shared family history? Perhaps there can be a generational exchange of ideas and skills?

These ABC's are the foundation of any gathering. They are the equivalent of putting an address into “WAZE” before heading out on your journey. It is crucial to know where you are going and why, and to articulate your final destination before heading out on the road. We encourage you to come up with your A,B,Cs only once you have immersed with the people who will be attending and experiencing the gathering. It is critical to have a sense of what is on people's hearts and minds; you cannot make that decision for them.

Do not ask people exactly what they want from their Thanksgiving dinner experience. Instead, try to hear what is important to them. Keep Henry Ford's quote – “If I'd asked people what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse” – in mind as you speak to people in advance of Thanksgiving. Perhaps call that difficult uncle, or quiet cousin, or friend you haven't seen in years, and ask: “what has been keeping you up at night this year? What do you value most about our family? What has brought you inspiration and hope over the past year? Where are you feeling depleted?” Your role is to take that information and cull it, pulling out themes, determining what is foremost on people's minds and bursting from their hearts. These themes can help inspire you to design meaningful experiences.

For example, if you are having a large family gathering, you might learn from some of your immerse conversations that family members feel that the family has grown so big and dispersed that people don't even know each other anymore. This might lead you to define your A,B,Cs as:

As a result of this Thanksgiving gathering,

A: Family members will feel more connected to each other

B: Family members will be more likely to connect throughout the year

C: Family members will better understand each other's interests and passions

Now that you have your destination plugged in, you can be creative about how to achieve this. Here are three ideas we love (and we encourage you to come up with your own):

- Family Networking: randomly pair up for one minute per round, and do up to 20 rounds – and have family members spend 30 seconds each answering: What am I most interested in? What fills me with passion/purpose? You can have light music playing in the background; your job is to call switch every minute.
- “If I Weren’t Doing What I’m Doing” – go around the table and have everyone share what they do professionally/with their time, and then answer, “but if I weren't doing what I’m doing, I would be...” This pushes the assumptions we might have about each other, and shows us another side of people we think we know well.
- 4 and 1: divide your guests into groups of 4 people, and give them 10 minutes to figure out four things they all share in common (the more specific, the better!) and one thing that is unique to each of them. Make sure to have a scribe to take notes! Then have each group share out what they learned about one another.

In our work, we have learned that, perhaps surprisingly, it is the “A” that drives it all. If all you have is an “A,” your gathering will still be meaningful and impactful (even in professional settings). People are motivated and inspired by their feelings. And feelings ultimately drive behavior. Ironically, we give the least amount of time and attention to that “A.” Rarely, even in social settings, do we ask: “How do we want people to feel at, and after, this experience?” It is a more complex question than it might seem. The good feelings of coming together and sharing a meal are a wonderful start. But there is so much more potential when we gather friends and family. How might you inspire your guests this Thanksgiving to connect – to each other, to a cause, to an idea – and to spark passion, meaning, and commitment? Might we all commit to taking this small and powerful step to move beyond the turkey, into the realm of giving thanks?

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