

# **HOW TO UNCONFERENCE YOUR BIRTHDAY**

**BY TON  
& ELMINE**

I WAS AMAZED HOW  
COMFORTABLE I FELT, I EVEN  
HAD MY OWN TEAPOT...  
SO IT WAS MUCH LIKE  
FEELING AT HOME THAT DAY AT  
YOUR PLACE, WHILE  
DISCUSSING WITH A LOT OF  
PEOPLE WHO I NEVER MEET  
BEFORE...

Patricia Wolf

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HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## HI THERE

*We, Elmine and Ton, know a lot of really great people. Friends, family, clients, and peers from around the internet. A lot of them fall into more than one category. They form our personal global village. While all of them know us, they often do not know each other. So every now and then we throw a party to get them in the same place. Not just a party, but a combination of a conference with a barbecue party. One day of intensive interaction, followed by a party on the next day. It's exciting to bring all those different people together, and see how well they get along.*



For Ton's 40th birthday we had about forty people on the conference day, a dozen nationalities coming to our home from seven different countries. Forty more joined us for the party the next day. For them to make the effort to come, to participate, to connect with each other was the most amazing gift Ton could wish for on his birthday. Being a host to it, providing the reason and place for it, was only a small gift in return. The really great gift that everybody gave to all others and themselves was to be there, to engage, and to build surprising connections.

It doesn't end with the party though. Connections got build, which lead to new and different things. We ourselves ended up with a long list of social 'obligations' such as return visits. One gift provokes another. In a sense it keeps on giving.

The theme of Ton's birthday un-conference and party was 'Working on Stuff That Matters', or in other words 'Do Epic Shit'. During the un-conference there was talk of an 'Epic Shit Multiplier'. We hope this e-book is one.

HI THERE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

**MY FIRST MEMORY WOULD BE PEDRO'S TALK ON "BENIGN MISCHIEF". IT MADE MY LIFE MUCH MORE FUN. I THINK IT'S THE BEST "LIFEHACK" I'VE HEARD (AND IMPLEMENTED) TO DATE...**

Ernst Phaff

# WHAT WE DRAW UPON

*There are many ways you can organize a conference or a workshop. Over the years we've visited many events, from the overpriced mass conferences to the budget-less workshop. We not only visited them, we actively participated in them as speakers or facilitators, and organized our own events. That's how we gained experience with various formats and that's where we pick and choose from.*



WHAT WE DRAW UPON

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## Blogwalk

Blogwalks were a series of workshops Ton organized together with Lilia Efimova and Sebastian Fiedler. Inspired by the online blogger communities they started to organize face-to-face meetings in 2004: one day where participants would engage in discussions around themes such as education, social web and bohemian work styles.

One person would arrange for a location for free, every participant chipped in for drinks and lunch. Weather permitting there would be a walk after lunch to have more movement during the day, hence the BlogWalk.

## BarCamp

Barcamps are workshop days where the participants create and give the sessions themselves. At the start of the day participants suggest presentations and discussions. They put together the program which is then followed throughout the day. The first Barcamp took place in 2005 in California. Soon Barcamps were taking place all around the world. First the topics were web and tech related, now it can be about anything.



## Open Space

In Open Space there is no program, just the time and the place to really interact with each other. Structures are tools to aid the interaction, and can be introduced and thrown out when appropriate. The people present are the ones you focus on, and you let your feet carry you to the conversations you want to be in. Being in the here and now is key in Open Space.

Open Space has some principles and one law.

It starts when it starts.  
It ends when it ends.  
(Or in other words, as long as there is energy. And we don't fret about what we didn't get to do.)

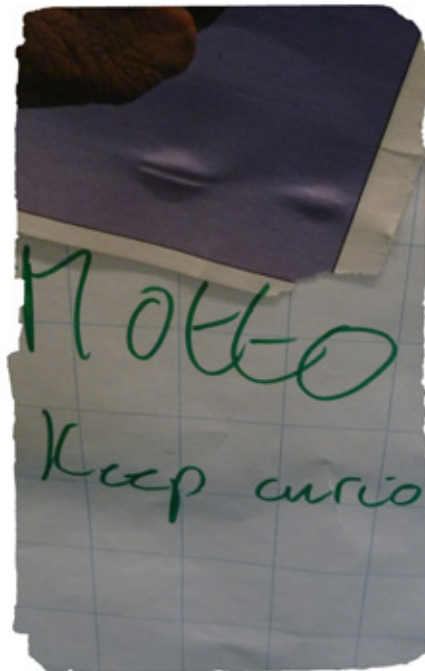
Whoever is here are the right people. Whatever we talk about is the right topic. (Or in other words, focus on who is here and what they have to say, go where the conversation is taking you. That's apparently what you have curiosity and energy for.)

The law of two feet.  
(When you find yourself in a conversation that you can't contribute to and you can't get anything from, feel free to move on. Attention and face to face time are scarce. Use it well.)

Be prepared to be surprised.  
(Be curious about the others and what they have to say. Different backgrounds may yield observations and experiences that surprise you. Really listen.)

### Done it before

This time around it was around Ton's 40th, but two years ago we did the same thing, on a slightly smaller scale, for Elmine's 30th. Back then we booked a proper conference room and a restaurant lunch. Although it was a great day we also noticed what impact the location can have on the atmosphere throughout the day.



WHAT WE DRAW UPON

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

TALKING WITH A PROFESSOR  
WHO JUST HAD TO LAUGH  
WHEN I TOLD HIM MY SON IS  
NOT YET ALLOWED TO PLAY ON  
A COMPUTER...

Brigitte van Dulmen

# PRE- FUN

*There are several things to do before you have an actual event on a certain day. But they are mostly simple things really, like choosing a date, location, and some sort of theme. But you do really need those to tempt people to come to your event. And don't forget to actually invite people. Without them it's less fun.*

## **Pick a date**

The most important thing is that you pick a date, and pick it early. When that date is, is less important. As long as you pick a date that suits you and you start communicating it early enough, any date is just as good as any other.

Of course combining the event with something personal like Ton's 40th birthday adds a lot of extra spice.

It combines the 'serious' with 'fun' and a festive mood, and you make it easier to mix different people from your social network.

It may be that your birthday is at a less practical time of year. At Elmine's birthday in August e.g. we noticed that especially many of our Dutch friends weren't able to come since they were still on summer holiday. It didn't matter though. Focus on the great people who are there. Even without some of our long time friends we had loads of fun.

PRE-FUN

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## JUST PICK ONE

**Pick a date and pick it well in advance. It should be a date that suits you or that is related to a special day, such as in our case Ton's birthday. People from abroad need to negotiate with their family, book flights and lodging, so communicate the date at least half a year in advance as an early warning.**





### Choose a theme

Choosing a theme for your event is important for several reasons. A good theme will make people curious, or trigger their imagination. If you are hoping to bring a very diverse group together your theme cannot be too narrowly defined, it needs to be able to appeal to all participants. A theme also needs to leave enough space so that 'anything' is still possible for the event itself. At the same time try and make it specific and tangible enough so it establishes enough context for the participants to feel they are there for a reason.

Too broad a theme becomes meaningless. Too narrow a theme isn't inclusive enough.

We found that choosing something that has meaning

for everybody individually on a human level works well. It also helped to pick a theme that really meant something to us personally.

What better place than a conference on a birthday to discuss "work-life balance"? So that's what we made the theme for Elmine's 30th birthday conference.

In the months leading up to Ton's 40th birthday, he was thinking a lot about choosing and finding projects and activities that have some meaning beyond the actual work itself, and how to pick the places, clients and colleagues with whom that's possible. How do you make sure you can "work on stuff that matters"? So that became the theme.

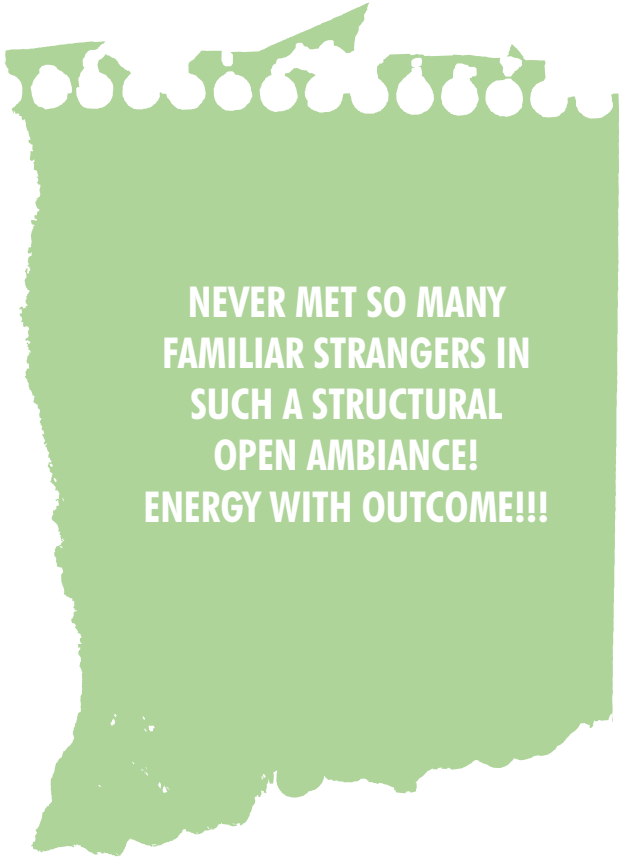


## **BROAD ENOUGH**

**Pick a theme that is broad enough to engage all people attending. They may have very different backgrounds so choose a theme that allows for connecting on a human level, regardless of profession or background. At the same time the theme needs to be specific enough to create an inclusive context for the event itself.**

PRE-FUN

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE



**NEVER MET SO MANY  
FAMILIAR STRANGERS IN  
SUCH A STRUCTURAL  
OPEN AMBIANCE!  
ENERGY WITH OUTCOME!!!**

Guus Vrauwdeunt

### Choose a location

For Elmine's birthday we arranged a decent sized conference room. We didn't know how many people we could expect, so we chose a location that could host up to 60 people conference style, and would still be cozy enough for just twenty.

We arranged for a lunch on site. Set on the spacious and green university campus, it was the perfect environment for deep thinking.

For Ton's 40th, we had a whole other issue and that was lack of budget. Remember the economic crisis? It hit us hard in the months before the conference. We had already announced the event, but we were seriously considering canceling the whole thing.

We were assuming to pay for the whole thing, including conference room and nice lunch and barbecue food. Then we realized that we've pulled off BlogWalks without any budget at all, so why couldn't we do this now as well?

The only real expenses we had during the conference would be the conference room and the lunch. So we dropped the venue reservation (thanks to flexible booking policies) and thought of alternatives. Immediately we thought of doing it in our home. We envisioned how we could repurpose and use the various rooms around the house and calculated how many people could fit.

We concluded it could work!

## ABOUT USING YOUR HOME

**Doing a conference in your home brings a special dynamic. A living room is a personal space and therefore it signals people to be more informal, and it invites people to have more personal conversations.**

**Unlike in a conference venue, in a home there are no cues that things are taken care of. There is no personnel running around to make more coffee and tea or to refill the water. It is clear that people are responsible for their own well-being and that makes people more active throughout the day.**

## **IT WILL FIT!**

**Our home is spacious for two, not for forty. That meant people could not avoid bumping into others and talking to them. How's that for a conversation starter?**

**However, spreading the conference out over three floors and four spaces meant there was plenty of room for sessions and to move around. It was only tight when everybody needed to be in the living room at the same time.**

## **Inviting the right people**

It's your party and usually you invite friends to a party. That is exactly what we did, except that friendship in an online world works slightly different.

We both operate in an international network, grown from blogger networks and thus we invited many of those. Most of them we've met face to face at conferences and workshops throughout the years. Some of them have become close friends even though they live thousands of kilometres away. The online interaction keeps us in contact between the times we can meet face-to-face.

Of course we invited old friends from university, and friends from our home town. But also clients and family members.

You'll be amazed what happens if you bring those various circles together.

Bringing a diverse group of people together means they need to come with an open mind and with curiosity towards the others. Invite people in a way that ensures self selection. Be both completely open in your invitation, by blogging an open invitation, as well as completely selective, by sending personalized emails. For some you stress the conference with minor

attention to the BBQ, for others you put the BBQ first while mentioning the conference as a side event, for yet others it's worded as a 'complete package'. That way people will interpret your invitation the way that fits them best without you having to exclude people purposefully. Now you get why we sent out personalized emails.



Don't try to decide for your friends if they will come. Even if you think there is only a slight chance they will actually come because they live so far away or are always so very busy, do invite them. They may very well surprise you. Surprise may also come from your open invitation on your blog. Someone you overlooked or didn't think of may take you up on it. Again this is self-selecting and for us it always worked out positively.

## **SELF-SELECTING MECHANISM**

**You can choose your tools to be self-selective. We used a wiki for keeping track of attendees and where people could read and build the program. People unfamiliar with this will either contact you personally to figure out whether to attend and what to do, or dropping the idea as too fancy. There you go, the group selects itself.**



### Communication is key

Six months before the conference we sent out a general message, communicating the dates.

Two months before the conference we sent out personal e-mails. Yes, e-mails still work, especially with so many people in our network striving for Inbox Zero. Making the e-mail personal is important to us, so we added a few personal lines and adjusted the invitation text where needed.

We communicated the theme we thought would be cool and set up a wiki page where everyone could discuss the theme. It gets people involved and people start imagining what could be.

We provided details for traveling. The exact venue wasn't know at the start, but stating in which town it will take place, is good enough at this point.

We suggested places to stay, such as hotels and B&B's, or even private options. We also offered to host several people in our home, a special spot for those on a tight budget.

We blogged about the event, with an open invitation to our readers. People who think they should have been invited will use this to get in touch. And it actually worked that way this time with one person!

## Let go

And then... let go. People can search the web for themselves for a place to stay. They know what they're looking for. Some like a simple hotel room, others love an artsy B&B. Some stay for just one night, others extend their stay and make it a mini-break.

People will start imagining what they want to talk about during the conference day. They might contribute to the wiki, they might not. If nothing happens it doesn't automatically mean people are not involved. They are, but simply aren't ready to share yet.



PRE-FUN

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

IF I CAN LIST ONE "MEMORY"  
IT WOULD BE ALL THE SEEDS  
THAT WERE SOWN. IT'S JUST  
NOW THAT I'M STARTING TO  
FIND TIME TO LOOK MORE INTO  
THE ETHICS OF FAB LABS AND  
OPEN GOVERNMENT, BUT THAT  
CAN BE DIRECTLY TRACED BACK  
TO DISCUSSIONS HAD AT YOUR  
UNCONFERENCE.

Johnny Søraker



# PREP- FUN

*People confirmed that they'll be coming to your event, booked trips and lodging and the conference is two weeks from now. It's time to make sure you can host forty people in your home for an inspiring day.*



## Things you can't do without

### Stickies

Those yellow (or blue or green) pieces of paper you can stick on any smooth surface. You need them for building the program, you need them for taking notes.

### Markers

To write on the Stickies. Duh! Make sure you have enough, but people can share their markers as well. A social object!

### Large paper sheets

Also called flip-chart. We don't own a holder/tripod for them, but the large sheets come in very handy for all sorts of workshops.

### Tape

To hang the sheets. We use painter's tape, that sticks just

enough to hold for a day and doesn't rip off paint from your walls when you take the sheets down.

### Seats

You probably don't have forty chairs in the house. We at least didn't. You don't need to have proper chairs for everyone. People can dig in on the couch, use pillows on the ground, you can even use a spare bed as a couch. We calculated the number of people that could be seated in each of the spaces and concluded that we needed twelve seats extra. Long live Ikea. We bought twelve cheap yet decent stools. Don't ask us how many screws came with them, please ;)

## **DO YOU REALLY NEED IT?**

**Don't overdo the buying. Only buy stuff that you can use yourself or repurpose (or sell easily on E-bay). The stools we bought come in handy at any party or meeting in our home office (want to borrow a few?).**

**We both facilitate workshops so we have a whole box filled with whiteboard-markers and stickies. It's part of our standard toolkit. We always only use whiteboard-markers, since they write well enough on paper AND can be washed off from any surface. Just in case.**

### **Food**

Such a conference day is inspiring and exhausting at the same time. People start the day early, some need to travel a few hours and they are alert all day long. Therefore they need plenty of energy throughout the day.

We bought most of the food for both the conference on Friday and the barbecue party the day after on the Wednesday before. We would have preferred Thursday, but it was a national Holiday meaning that all shops were closed! We almost forgot about that....

To cut down on the budget we arranged for a typical Dutch lunch: bread with slices of cold meat and cheeses, some soup and salads. Of course you could arrange for a caterer, but it had a nice DIY feeling to it. People love to help you out setting the table and prepare the salads.



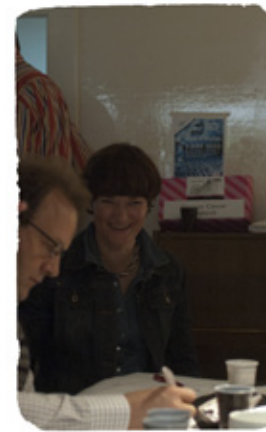
## **SWEET TOUCH**

**Provide snacks for the inbetween moments as well. Fruit is a healthy option, like bananas and apples. We also provided every conversation space with a bowl of candies. You can do without them, but doesn't it give a sweet touch to the space?**



## **Drinks**

As much as people need to nibble they need to drink. The tap water in our home is just as good as bottled water, so we provided pitchers with water and cups to drink from. We added a bottle of juice for those not a fan of drinking water. The coffee machine was on permanent duty. It's all about leaving cues to remind people to keep drinking.



## **Spring Cleaning**

Or Summer cleaning, Winter cleaning, Autumn cleaning. Depending on the date of your event.

Use the big event to clean every corner of your home. And you won't believe how many corners your home has! Make sure that everything is clean and neat, so you won't have to feel embarrassed if someone opens a door they weren't supposed to open.

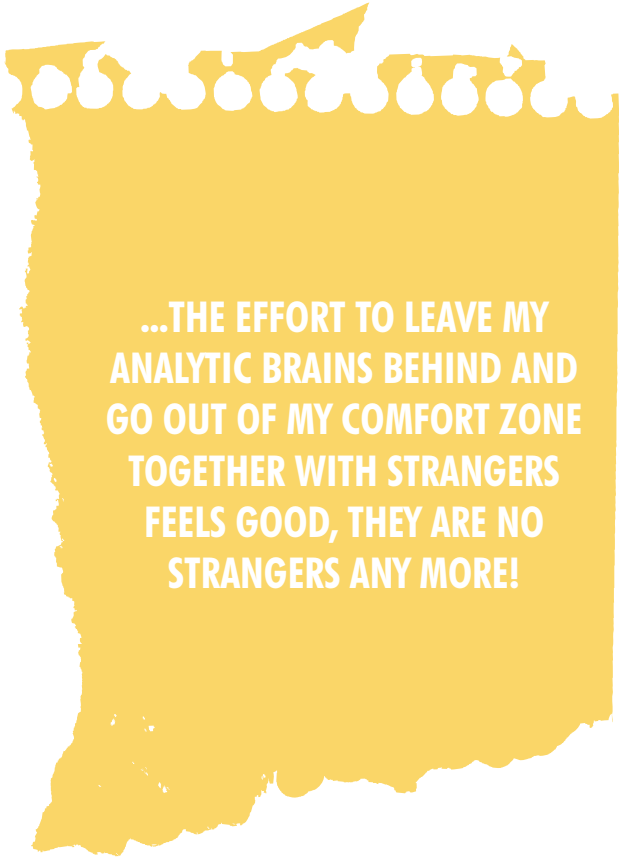
In the end we used every single space in our home, including our own bedroom as a baby change and sleeping room. It might seem invasive, but remember, you invited your friends so what are you worried about?

## **BUY WHAT YOU NORMALLY BUY**

**You probably are just as annoyed as we are with all the left-over bottles with soft drinks you normally don't drink yourself after a party. Some shops are willing to take back unopened bottles, but we take a different approach. We only buy drinks we like to drink ourselves. It may however take a month or two to work through the left-overs, depending on your estimation skills :)**

PREP.FUN

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE



**...THE EFFORT TO LEAVE MY  
ANALYTIC BRAINS BEHIND AND  
GO OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE  
TOGETHER WITH STRANGERS  
FEELS GOOD, THEY ARE NO  
STRANGERS ANY MORE!**

Janine Swaak

# AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

*It's the morning of your event and you get up early to arrange the last details. You're a bit nervous and wonder if you've got everything you need. Then the first guests arrive and it has begun.*



## **Facilitating is a professional skill**

Very important during a workshop is its facilitation. Facilitating is a thing you need to learn. We both have experience with organizing workshops so we know what we need to do. Here are some of the things a facilitator does.

Facilitation is not about content, and all about context and process. But most of all it's about letting go. Trust people.

You invited lots of people. They know you, but most don't know each other. So make people comfortable when they arrive, help them become part of the group. At the start set the context, set the pace of things.

If you are relaxed your guests will be too. Explain the expectations (like giving everyone permission to get their own things from the kitchen and the fridge, or asking them to keep an open mind), explain the rules of engagement. It helps to articulate the fears or doubts you suspect some might have ("what are we going to do today, will it be fun?"), by acknowledging them you make it easier for people to create a great time for each other.

## Choose your role

You need to decide beforehand what role you are going to take. If you will facilitate the day, than it's not really possible to participate. If you, as the party-boy/girl, want to participate the whole day, make sure you ask someone else to facilitate.

Ton chose to mainly facilitate the day. A role he feels very comfortable with, even though it meant that he wasn't able to participate in many of the sessions. Just listening in, knowing that you're the person that brought all these great people together is a feeling that lasts for a long time after the party is over. After lunch, having made sure that everyone was having a good time, he participated more actively in the sessions.



AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

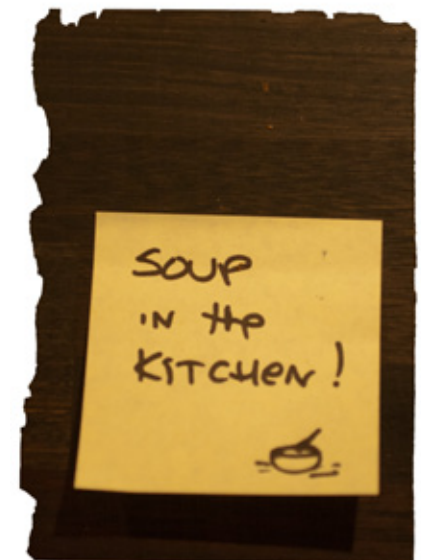
HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## Leaving cues and clues

A house lacks the cues a conference venue has. Normally signs in your house where the lavatory is and where the office is don't make sense. But for this special day, make those signs. Print them out on paper and stick them on the doors and walls. That way people don't have to guess which door to open to find the toilet.

Give people access to your internet. Change the password to something easy to type if you can and stick the name of the network and its password to the wall in every space people will be. Just being in a conversation in the room doesn't mean they have to be disconnected all day long. They might even want to show something online. Let them.

Stick the Open Space rules to the wall in the conversation spaces. Don't forget to practice what they preach.





## Supply chain

We had time to serve the first guest, but the fifth person to arrive already had to look after himself. So make sure you have the first round of coffee ready and give the first four guests instructions where to find everything. Your cues on the walls come in very handy here.

Before people bustle into the various rooms, make sure every space is supplied with stickies, markers, water, juice, cups, sweets and chairs. That way people can immediately jump into their conversation.

ALTHOUGH OBJECTIVELY SPEAKING WE WERE JUST IN AN OVERCROWDED FAMILY HOME, IT FELT LIKE WE WERE IN A HUGE AND SPACIOUS CONFERENCE CENTRE. ... THE BUZZ OF ALL THOSE EXCITING AND EXCITED PEOPLE EXPRESSING AND COMPARING THEIR MULTITUDE OF OPINIONS, MADE US LITERALLY FORGET WHERE WE WERE.

Aldo de Moor

I WAS HEAVILY PREGNANT THEN WITH MY DAUGHTER, ANNA. ... THE EFFECTS OF THE UNCONFERENCE WOULD BE A BIT LIKE PREGNANCY - IDEAS THAT GROW INSIDE FOR A WHILE AND ARE STARTING TO TURN INTO SOMETHING TANGIBLE ONLY NOW.

Lilia Efimova

THIS UNCONFERENCE  
ILLUSTRATED THE STRENGTH  
OF WEAK TIES AND SOCIAL  
NETWORKING FOR LEARNING.  
BRING PEOPLE, PASSIONED  
ABOUT THEIR STUFF AND  
INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED TO  
SHARE KNOWLEDGE, TOGETHER  
AND LEARNING WILL TAKE  
PLACE.

Wilfred Rubens

OF COURSE THE END OF IT ALL  
WILL BE REMEMBERED BY OUR  
FAMILY FOR YEARS TO COME AS  
OUR CAR BROKE DOWN JUST  
AROUND THE CORNER AND WE  
HAD TO RETURN AND STAY THE  
NIGHT. THANKS A TON FOR THE  
HOSPITALITY SHOWN.

Harold van Garderen

### Kick-off / Kick-ass

We took our time for the first round of coffee. People wanted to greet us. Some people we hadn't seen in a while. People want to acclimatize to the room and the other participants. They had been driving for a while or sat two hours in a train. So inviting everyone from 9h00 and not starting before 10h00 gives everyone ample time. And it gave us just enough time for the finishing touches.

Slightly after 10am Ton gave an introduction to the day: welcoming everybody, explaining who is here (don't do a general introduction of each person: wasted time!), why we're here and the theme. Ton gave some general household-rules, basically that people had to look after themselves,

and set the work shop rules explaining both the Open Space laws and how we would set up the program in BarCamp style.

Then two of the participants led us through an introductory networking game so that people would get to know each other.



## **CONNECTING STRANGERS**

**We invited people from very different circles, so to make sure we got people out of their circle of comfort they had to connect with someone they'd never met before. At the start of the day, two by two, they had to talk about themselves and explain what they do and what they're interested in. One person filled out a profile for the other. By looking at all the profiles (we put them on the wall), and based on the conversations throughout the day everyone then had to find at least two conversation partners for the other, based on common interests.**

AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

### **At last: the Content!**

Up until this moment we didn't talk much about what was on the program. Except for the general theme we didn't negotiate with speakers or visitors to give a talk about topic X or Y. This was all done on the morning itself. Some participants announced what they might want to talk about, but on the day itself, that could have changed.

This is the moment in the day that together the participants build the program. To create a schedule with sessions, mainly conversations, in smaller groups.

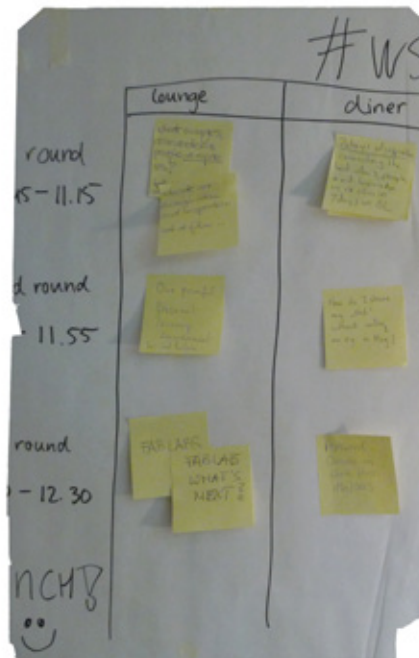
### **Building the program together**

Create a blank canvas with time slots for each conversation space you have. Use those big pieces of paper you bought.

In the morning we only put up the schedule for the morning sessions. One: with four rooms and three time-slots, the schedule was already rather big. Two: people might suggest different sessions in the afternoon based on the discussions during the morning. Therefore we built the afternoon program after lunch.

Provide people with sticky notes and markers to write down their suggestions and then give them five minutes to think and write down in a few words what session they want to suggest.

Then let people stick their session to the canvas. Let people choose a time-slot themselves. First come, first serve. If there are more topics than time-slots, don't worry. Some discussion will emerge, which can lead to the combination of suggestions, or other changes in the program. Other things you can keep in reserve for the afternoon.



AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## TRICK OF THE TRADE

**You're probably all too familiar with conferences running behind schedule, most likely right from the start. We left plenty of 'free' time between the sessions, without mentioning them in the schedule as such. We didn't communicate the time-schedule in full detail and therefore no-one noticed that during the day we both ran 10 minutes ahead and 30 minutes behind schedule, and ended exactly on time. As long as the major things like start, end, lunch and afternoon drinks are done at the promised times, everything is fine.**

### Starting the program

Once the schedule was all filled up with sessions, we gave a short summary of what was on there. It gave people a first notion what they could be interested in and therefore they needed less time to read the schedule to decide where they wanted to go.

Then it was time to let people look at the schedule themselves and make a decision. After a few minutes we encouraged people to find the right room or space and let people start their session when they were ready for it.

### Following the program

Obviously we set an amount of time for each session. In our case 30 minutes per session. We left 10 minutes between the sessions so that we didn't have to rush through the program. We didn't worry too much about sessions taking a little bit longer. The 10 minutes in between gave people time to take another peak at the schedule and decide where to go next and grab something to eat or drink on their way.

## **BLOW THE WHISTLE**

**Ever noticed how many people don't wear watches anymore? After one round we found out that it was useful to signal when the 30 minutes were up and that it was time to move to the next session. A whistle, a bell, playing a song on the stereo, it all works, as long as you don't force people out of a discussion and let people decide for themselves after hearing the signal to go somewhere else.**



## Lunch

Take your time for lunch. This is the moment people engage in deeper conversations one on one.

Knowing how we react ourselves on not having eaten enough after an intense morning, and after attending so many conferences where they serve lunch not before 13:30, we scheduled the lunch shortly after noon.

We made sure that there was food to nibble before lunch as well, just in case early risers got hungry earlier. We bought plenty of fruit to serve this purpose.

We didn't cater lunch, instead (remember the low-budget thing) we served a typical Dutch lunch ourselves. Ingredients: fresh bread

(in several varieties), lots of various toppings (cheeses, meats, jam, sprinkles etc.). Also there was plenty of soup (we had two kinds, both vegetarian). The not so typical Dutch touch was to add several salads to the mix, for those not a big fan of bread.

Of course we asked people beforehand if they had any special diets. You never know if someone has allergies you'd never think of. As long as you vary enough with what you put on the table, you don't have to create special plates for people. Especially if you leave the salads meat- and cheese-less.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

**When we were both involved with a group called IFCCC we experimented with how to run pleasant and intensive workshops. An important component was the food we served the participants. Normally you see a big dip in attention after people stuffed themselves during lunch. Instead of serving just one big meal in the middle of the day, we served food during the entire day, with specific nutritional value, good for your mind and body. It was just the one time we did this, but it seemed to work really well.**

**However, this was a rather intensive thing to do. It involved one person to prepare the food all day long. Instead, we chose a different approach for overcoming the after lunch dip.**





AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## WALK FOR THOUGHT

Science has proven that people think better while moving their bodies, but besides science a walk provides a very nice opportunity to talk one on one, or just enjoy the fresh air and views and be alone with your thoughts.



## Walk

Unless it's raining cats and dogs, there is no excuse to not go outside. We took the whole group for a walk around the neighborhood. It used to be a traditional part of the BlogWalks and it's a very nice break after spending a whole morning indoors, as well as a good way to get energized after lunch.



## Program part two

In the morning we only scheduled the pre-lunch sessions. Now that we were back from the walk, we started to plan the rest of the afternoon sessions. We followed the same procedure as the morning-scheduling, except that we also drew from the sessions that didn't make it to the schedule at first. On a new piece of paper we built the schedule again. Some people had new ideas after having discussions and conversations earlier on the day and added those to the program.

People peeked at the schedule, chose where to go and the sessions were on again.

AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## Closure

So often we were at a conference where the organizers didn't know how to create a proper end to it. Either they're too shy to take credit for what they've pulled off or they assume that most people left already and the end of the program is the last speaker to be on stage.

Closure is important. It doesn't have to be long, it doesn't have to be a closing keynote, but it should serve as a focal point for everyone to end the day and give them an opportunity to thank you as a group, not just as individuals.

We gathered everyone after the last session (mind you, that was even half an hour before the official end-time we set) and Ton made some closing remarks, the most important of which was 'thank you!'.

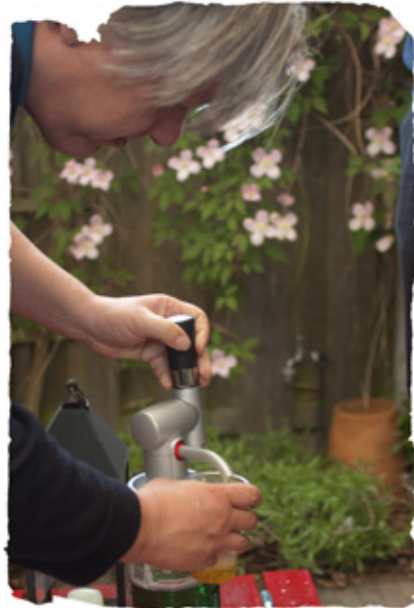
Last action of the day was closing the networking game we started in the morning: building a network map of the new connections that were made during the day.

Obviously this was the time to open up a few bottles as well.

## Party-time

Drinks at the end of the day give people opportunity to pick up on conversations they had earlier, give them time to exchange contact details with their new friends and digest what happened during the day.

We had drinks and nibbles, played music on the stereo and arranged for a big and varied Chinese/Indonesian take-away dinner for those who wished to stay. Remember that this was just the pre-party to the proper party the following day. Many participants stayed the night in town to join that as well.



AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

## And then there was a proper party

The real reason people are willing to stay for a weekend in a nondescript provincial town in Eastern Netherlands is that people love to gather around food. So on the Saturday after the workshop we threw a barbecue party for even more people than were present at the workshop. This time around for about eighty people.

We hired a big grill from a local butcher (permanent outside grills are rare for this often rainy area, so almost all butchers have grills for hire). We (you could also read: Ton) marinated the meat ourselves and added a lot of vegetable dishes and salads (also with rice, pasta and couscous) to go with the meat.

Don't ever compromise on the quality of the food!

Family is important, for everyone. Kids were welcome at the conference and they were welcome at the party. We already cleared the rooms in our home for the conference, so all we had to do was repurpose the rooms. We created a kids' playroom with Lego and other toys and our office became the Wii/DS gaming room. We don't have kids, but we do like to game. We showed the kids the rooms when coming in (mind you, most of them we hadn't met before) and left the rest to the many parents present. As far as we could see, they enjoyed themselves.

With eighty people in your home it will be a mess and the only thing you can do is to accept it will be a mess. Except for our bedrooms we have laminate and stone floors. Plenty of stuff ended up on the floor, but surprisingly enough nothing was permanently damaged and nothing got spilled on the furniture. A mob was all we needed to get rid of the evidence the day after.

Good friends we have, eh?



## **SECRET TRICK OF THE TRADE**

**Go to a self-butcherer in Germany to buy your bbq sausages, as they are excellent and very tasty. Germany too far for you? Ha! Not so far for us.**



## Aftercare

The conference is over, the party is over, the last guests left, and the house is clean.

We were left with a warm feeling inside of being able to connect so many of our friends from various circles.

But the real connections start after the event. Conversations on Twitter start between people who connected at our party, people report back to us with the same warmth as we felt and others are coming up with inspiring blog posts. Return visits get planned.

This is the time to start sharing about the event. Blogposts, pictures, videos. It's also time to collect what others post online and to send out a thank you e-mail to all participants.

For Elmine's birthday we shared a document with impressions (a Google doc did the trick). It contained a picture from everyone there with contact details.

Ton made sure we could do something with the network chart we created at the end of the conference and digitalized it.

And we captured the Grand Theory of Unconferencing Your Birthday in a proper (e) book, explaining how we did it and spice it up with pictures and anecdotes from the participants. Which you've just finished reading.

AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE

**NOW GO AND CREATE YOUR OWN EPIC SHIT MULTIPLIER.**

**ADD YOUR PERSONALITY TO IT.**

**DON'T ORGANIZE IT EVERY YEAR.**

**KEEP REPEATING HOW SPECIAL THE EVENT WAS AFTERWARDS.**

**DON'T TELL ANYONE WHERE YOU BOUGHT THE SAUSAGES.**

**MAKE IT A MYTH.**

Ton & Elmine



### **A special thank you to:**

Patrick Willemsen for making a significant part of the pictures in this book.

All unconference participants, Ernst Phaff, Johnny Søraker, Henriette Weber-Andersen, Thomas Kristiansen, Gabriela Avram, Patrick Willemsen, Brigitte van Dulmen, Tjores van Dulmen, Harold van Garderen, Lilia Efimova, Robert Slagter, Tony Quinlan, Paolo Valdemarin, Monica Loredan, Abdul Advany, Peter Troxler, Keith Fortowsky,

Wilfred Rubens, Aldo de Moor, Simon Koolwijk, Patricia Wolf, Frank Oxener, Marc Coenders, Siert Wijnia, Yvette Veninga, Guus Vrouwdeunt, Hans Thijs, Mirjam ten Dam, Kim Spinder, Davied van Berlo, Peter Kaptein, Pedro Custodio, Patricia Custodio, Heinz Wittenbrink, Anu Määta, Janine Swaak, Marc Otte.

All those others that attended the barbecue party.

You all being there was the best birthday gift. Ever.

AND THEN THERE WAS A CONFERENCE

HOW TO UNCONFERENCE



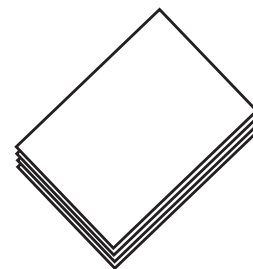


I DREW ONE OF THE FIRST LINES WITH A HEART TO EXPRESS HOW MUCH I LOVED SOMEONE WHO WAS ALSO THERE (ON A LARGE SHEET TO SHOW OUR CONNECTIVITY) AND AFTER A WHILE I SAW MANY HEARTS ON THE SAME SHEET. FOR ME THIS WAS ONE OF THE MANY EXAMPLES OF A GREAT INFORMAL ATMOSPHERE OF BUILDING UPON IDEAS OF OTHERS, WITHOUT JUDGEMENT, BEING WORK RELATED OR NOT.

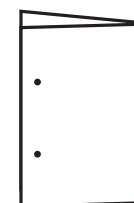
Abdul Advany

# LET'S GET PHYSICAL

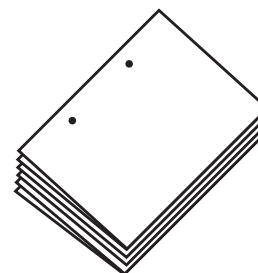
**1. Print** on A4 paper.



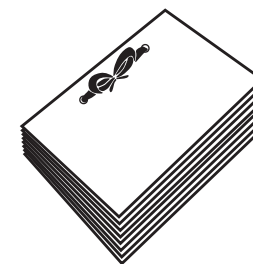
**2. Fold** in the center with the print to the outside.



**3. Stack** and perforate, max. 5 at once. Keep your eyes on the page numbers for the right sequence.



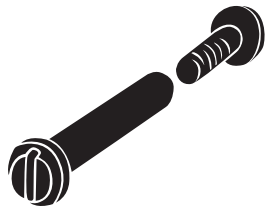
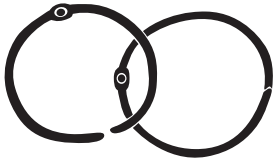
**4. Bind** all the folded pages together. That's your book, enjoy!



# **BINDING** **SUGGESTIONS**

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

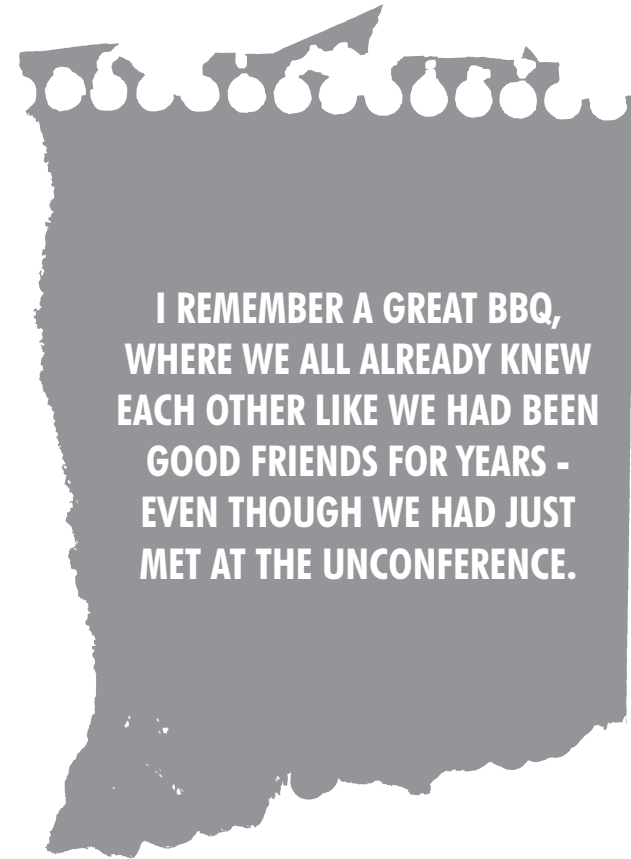
HOW TO UNCONFERENCE



These are some binding suggestions. Pick one of these or be creative!

Have fun and enjoy reading!

BUROPONY



I REMEMBER A GREAT BBQ,  
WHERE WE ALL ALREADY KNEW  
EACH OTHER LIKE WE HAD BEEN  
GOOD FRIENDS FOR YEARS -  
EVEN THOUGH WE HAD JUST  
MET AT THE UNCONFERENCE.

Keith Fortowsky

## Colofon

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2011

