“Overall this was one of the best trainings I have ever been to.”

“Keep doing what you are doing AND continue to let ensuing conversations inform future trainings.”

“I feel like I’m part of a community to which I can contribute and that will support me as well in my journey.”
Background

From June 27 - 29, 2012, 44 faculty and staff from across the University of Minnesota spent three days together exploring *The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter*, in a training hosted by the Center for Integrative Leadership, with financial support from InCommons and the Bush Foundation. Participants represented a diverse cross-section of positions and departments at the University, including faculty, teaching and administrative staff, and collegiate deans from sixteen schools, offices, centers and departments across the University, including the following:

*Office of Human Resources (Organizational Effectiveness), Extension (Children, Youth, and Family Consortium), Humphrey School of Public Affairs (Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, Public and Nonprofit Leadership and Management Center), College of Liberal Arts (Community Service-Learning Center, Office of Information Technology), College of Education (Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development), College of Design (Architecture; Design, Housing, and Apparel; Center for Sustainable Building Research; Landscape Architecture), College of Pharmacy, Minnesota Medical Foundation, Office for Equity and Diversity (Women’s Center), Office of the Registrar (Academic Support Resources), Office of Information Technology, Office of Senior Vice President and Provost, School of Public Health (Epidemiology), Student Services – Rochester Campus, Clean Energy Resource Teams*

Purpose

The following outcomes were identified for this training:

- Learn valuable approaches and tools for engaging community stakeholders in meaningful conversations.
- Develop a shared understanding of collaboration as a strategic means for dealing with increasingly complex cross-cutting issues.
- Explore and practice approaches that invite people to contribute their diverse knowledge and skills to meet a common purpose.
- Be invited to join a growing community of practitioners within and beyond the University of Minnesota as a part of the statewide InCommons initiative (www.incommons.org).

The following purpose was defined by the hosting team in the design of this training: *To be in learning together around the patterns and practices of Art of Hosting and to transform our understanding of leadership so we can courageously serve what is needed now in the University community.*

Twenty-seven (27) of the forty-one (41) participants (66%) completed a post-training online feedback survey. Eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents rated the training as valuable or extremely valuable (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale). Forty-one percent (41%) of the overall respondents rated it as extremely valuable. Additional feedback is summarized below.

Value

For many respondents, this training was an *exposure to new techniques, tools, and frameworks* that, though they might have heard about before, they had not had the chance to experience. Respondents specifically mentioned the value of proaction café, reflective listening, world café, open space, and
knowledge camps. One respondent also highlighted the value of learning the why and when of how to apply these conversational models (in addition to the how).

Two other themes emerged from the survey around the value of this particular training for participants: the value of the experiential learning and reflection format and the value of this particular training in fostering meaningful new connections between participants from across the University.

**Experiential learning & teaching format**
Participants equally highlighted the value of learning the fundamentals of the techniques and frameworks through mini-teaching sessions from the hosts and the value of learning-by-doing – being encouraged to practice the techniques and reflect on this practice in real-time during the training.

*I like that people were able to volunteer to take part in the work (learning) during the three days.*

*The quick 'teaching sessions' about the core concepts were a good support to the experiential learning.*

*I most valued] the learning that occurred from listening to the groups' comments and reflections on teachings.*

Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents – as designated by a 3 or 4 on a 4-point scale - felt they had sufficient opportunities to practice what they were learning over the course of the training.

**Relationship-building**
Many participants emphasized that they valued the training as an opportunity to build relationships with colleagues across the University of Minnesota. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of respondents – as designated by a 3 or 4 on a 4-point scale - agreed that they made new connections or deepened relationships with colleagues over the course of the training.

*I most valued] building community and seeing the possibilities of a critical mass of University employees living these principles.*

**Pace and format**
A couple respondents spoke to the pace and format of the training.

*Each and every piece was important. I found varying our groups and activities so we worked with different participants was great in getting others perspectives and shared experiences.*

*Opportunities to practice and to listen, to watch and to learn...it was a good rhythm and balance for me. I particularly appreciate that for many parts of the training there was a great deal of time allowed for understanding, discussion, questions, etc. So often, we want to do so much and that leaves us with insufficient time to process. This training, for the most part, allowed for more time for important reflection, processing, and questions.*
Critiques & Recommendations

Of the nineteen percent (19%) of the respondents who rated the training as less than valuable (2 or 3 on a 5 point scale), tone, size, and focus.

Tone
Similar to previous trainings, a few of the participants who rated this training as less valuable cautioned around tone, encouraging the training hosts to be sensitive to alienating language and open to questions.

At times, the new-agey culture surrounding the training detracted from the incredible value of the philosophy/underpinnings of AoH. To appeal to a broader audience and prevent people from disengaging, the material could be presented in more universal, less touchy-feely ways.

Be more open to questions. Sometimes felt like you couldn’t disagree with anything or it was shut down - like you had to be a true believer.

Size
One of the participants who rated it as less valuable along with a couple others who rated it as more valuable suggested this was either the largest group they would want to be a part of for this training or that the training was too large and should have been capped at 30 to 35 participants.

Focus
One of the participants who rated the training as less valuable desired more of a focus on the techniques versus the underpinning worldview and philosophy.

I was less interested and engaged in the "host yourself" component of the 4-fold practice. I know it’s core to the philosophy, but it felt less fitting to my needs and interests. I would have preferred more time spent on some of the group practices, such as collective mind mapping, collective story harvesting, action learning, and Theory U that I think I can apply in my workplace.

Themes of recommendations that were provided by the eighty-one percent (81%) of survey respondents who rated the training as valuable or extremely valuable (4 or 5 on a 5-point scale) were as follows:

Harvest
A handful of respondents encouraged more time spent learning and practicing harvesting.

I think what comes out of the meeting is critical to whether any of these hosting techniques will be successful. I think I now know how to host a meeting because of this training, but I’m not sure that I really learned how to harvest meeting information well.

Although it was really helpful to practice some of these techniques, some of the practice meetings were very long and I would have loved to have had a discussion after each practice meeting on various harvesting techniques.
Post-practice debrief
A few participants encouraged more debrief after each of the core methods: world café, open space, and proaction café.

  World Cafe--just didn't quite get the point; could improve with more time for discussion at the end regarding what really happened, how to actually do one of these in practice, what to expect, etc.

  The "Proaction Cafe" was a bit fuzzy to me in terms of who was supposed to be doing what and its purpose, so I think more clarification regarding the overall "tool" and process, as well as clearer instructions, could have helped this part of the training.

Application
Twenty-six (26) of the twenty-seven (27) respondents agreed they are likely to incorporate Art of Hosting skills and practices into their work at the University. Twenty-four (24) of the twenty-seven (27) respondents agreed they are likely to incorporate Art of Hosting skills and practices into their lives outside of the University.

Conclusions
Nearly all the survey participants found value in the training and expressed not only a commitment to applying what they had learned and practiced, but also an appreciation for the forging of new connections and deepening of existing relationships across the University. Though each Art of Hosting training is unique in design, much of the value participants highlighted mirrored that which was highlighted after the two previous UMN Art of Hosting trainings. We continue to use the critiques and recommendations to inform the design of future trainings. It was overall well received and impactful.

When we sent an email out following the training, inviting the 120 individuals trained in Art of Hosting techniques at UMN to be part of an organizing team for a community of practice, 24 individuals enthusiastically responded. We look forward to continuing to share and deepen the use of the participatory practices under the Art of Hosting umbrella across the University of Minnesota.