

Six roles for a Host Leader

Mark McKergow and Helen Bailey's original book *Host* presented for the first time their models of six roles and four positions for a host leader. While their book is not the first to look at hosting as a key aspect of being with people, it was the first to explore in depth and in detail, through history and in different cultures, what great hosts actually do, and how this can transfer directly into leading. The metaphor of a host is instantly apparent to almost everyone. These roles and positions add a wealth of detail and possibility. It's worth briefly outlining the roles and positions here, as many of the following chapters draw on and expand them in different contexts.

Step forward or step back?

The key question for leaders: are you going to step forward or step back next? Both of these moves, and combining them into a dance, are at the heart of Host Leadership. Are you going to step forward to make something happen, or step back and allow others space and time to respond and make their own contributions?

The six roles

These six roles are different ways for a host leader to step forward when they need to. They are ways to bring people together in a useful fashion, to create engagement which in turn leads to performance and results.

Initiator

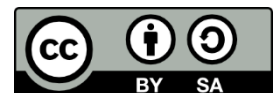
We rarely initiate entirely on our own, from nothing or out of thin air. There is usually a call to action of some kind. This may take the form of an interest, dissatisfaction, a passion, a rage, or just wanting to see something done better or differently; it may be big, for example, ending child exploitation, or it may be smaller, for example, organising the team's documents so people can find what they need more quickly. Whatever, leaders step forward and make the first move.



Inviter



Thinking invitationally is at the heart of Host Leadership. When we invite, and people accept, they show up being involved, open, engaged, part of the process. When we invite, and people don't accept, well, that's a message that what we're offering isn't exactly what is wanted. Thinking invitationally is about reaching out and engaging with those around us in a way which invites – rather than insists – that they join us in working on some project, purpose or endeavour. It's about seeing the participation of others as a valuable gift, rather than the result of a contract of employment.



Space Creator

The role of host involves creating a suitable space - physical and interactional/psychological - for events to emerge and unfold. Much of the new literature on leadership speaks of the importance of the space and of allowing and nurturing emergence within the space. The host plays a vital role upfront in deciding on the space and how it is to be decorated, laid out and used. This is another example of the flexibility of the host role – one minute making brave and influential decisions and the next clearing up a spilled drink to keep the space refreshed and useful.



Gatekeeper



A host leader knows the importance (and the creative possibilities) of defining boundaries. A boundary can serve the host leader well by making clear what expectations and norms apply. In the same way as a host can have a “leave your shoes in the hall” norm, the host leader will take care to choose boundaries that can help people understand where they are and what they are committing to do in a certain place or role.

Connector

Host leaders build connections between people, link people and ideas AND know when to leave them to get on with it. The connector joins people together and creates the possibility of something emerging. If we’ve initiated something, invited people and created a space, we clearly want to create something that it wouldn’t happen without people getting together. As connectors, we understand that, having brought people together, at some point we need to get out of the way, let the magic work and allow possibilities to emerge.



Co-participator



Co-participators initiate, provide AND join in along with everyone else. It is no surprise; for example, when we are invited for dinner, we expect the host to not only serve us with food, but eat the same food with us. Not only that; hosting etiquette the world over demands that the host serve their guests first. In hosting terms, this is a clear expectation. In leadership terms, it’s not so clear. When the news is full of stories about bank CEOs who appear to have eaten heartily in terms of massive bonuses, we might think that the ancient values of relationship and hospitality have well and truly been abandoned.

The four positions for a host leader are available on another resource sheet from [Host Leadership](#).

