



Defining the Indefinable

Unconference designer **Misha Glouberman** is humanizing relationships—one event at a time.

BY SHEILA HETI

When host, conference organizer, author and workshop leader Misha Glouberman was trying to figure out what career he was most suited for, he approached his friends, one by one, took them out for coffee and asked them the same four questions: “What do you think I’m good at? What are some things I seem to enjoy doing? What are some things I’m bad at? What are some things I don’t like to do?”

This may seem like a strange way of going about things, but for Glouberman, it was the most natural. He is someone who works and thinks best in conversation with other people. He trusts people and never gives the impression that he thinks he’s the only one with the right answer. He’s curious and inquiring and likes dealing with lots of data, especially data that comes from what other people say. He’s analytic and thorough in his thinking, taking nothing for granted (including what he likes to do!) and has a healthy dose of self-doubt.

Oddly, when he conducted these interviews 10 years ago, he was not a young or unschooled man; he was a Harvard philosophy graduate in his mid-30s and one of the most sought-after hosts in Toronto—someone whose name was routinely invoked when organizers were trying to make an event more engaging, fun and smart. He was frequently recognized in the streets and often asked to audition for hosting positions at CBC Radio, Canada’s national broadcaster (imagine something between NPR and the BBC). He was best-known for his charming, quick-witted conducting of a monthly barroom lecture series, Trampoline Hall, at which people deliver prepared talks on subjects outside their areas of expertise.

The answers Glouberman received from his friends surprised him; everyone noticed the same skills: They said he

should be on his feet before crowds, not sitting at a desk; he should do a variety of different things that should involve teaching, communication or talking with people in some way. Finally, almost everyone wondered why he was conducting this exercise in the first place. His friends all told him, “Misha, you *have* a job.” But when he asked them, “What?” no one could really say.

Imagine a tall, burly-ish man with lots of black curly hair and a beard, who wears a largish suit and a wide tie, who has a kind, concerned expression and a slightly sped-up way of talking, who is quick and funny (he worked on the *Harvard Lampoon* in college); someone with a lot of charisma.

Many of his projects can seem like impractical, ridiculous art projects: Glouberman taught a six-week class in how to play charades; he taught a class on happiness to his friends, which he held in his kitchen and took no money for (the point was partly so that he could understand “what everyone around me thought they were up to”). He runs a series of events called “Terrible Noises for Beautiful People” where he gets non-musicians to engage in vocal sound improvisations. He ran a weekly games night at a boutique hotel, where people played such games as Scrabble, Jenga and “Cobra,” a complex music-improv game designed by experimental composer John Zorn.

Increasingly, however, he also does more obviously practical work. He runs a neighborhood residents association, on behalf of whom he negotiates with bars and the city government, trying to keep everyone’s interests on the table in an area that’s quickly becoming gentrified. That work led him to an

interest in conflict resolution and teaching classes in negotiation and communication, based on the “Principled Negotiation” approach taught at Harvard. One student of the class, Marsha Stall, who is involved in meeting planning and produces training materials, called Glouberman “possibly one of the best teachers or presenters I have ever encountered.” And of course, he runs conferences.

Among his most notable projects was a conference at which people who worked as doctors or engineers or such things in their home countries but now drove cabs or worked as security guards met to discuss immigration policy and their experiences, a day he describes as “moving and tremendous.” Another time, he helped carefully selected people on opposite ends of the copyright debate come together and talk, where previously they had been communicating through “angry press releases.”

“What I want to do is humanize relationships,” Glouberman says, “because a lot of the time, if there are people you don’t know personally, who you disagree with, you can perceive them as just an abstract enemy, but often if you can meet and talk to them, that changes how you see them.”

One of his favorite recent events was *Handheld*, an unconference he worked on with the documentary filmmaker Katerina Cizek and the National Film Board (NFB). The purpose of the “small, light structure” they developed (he always wants to keep structures “small” and “light”) was to open lines of communication between health-care providers, policy wonks, politicians and some of the most disadvantaged end-users of the system: homeless mothers.

“We wanted people to speak about things that are unspoken,” Cizek says. “Precisely the reason we chose Misha is because he’s aligned with that philosophy of approach.”

The NFB had produced a film of these young mothers, and one of the challenges of the conference was to incorporate that longish film (in which the mothers are mostly critical of the system) into the day’s conversation in an effective way. They structured the event so that people watched the film in short bits and then talked about them in small discussion groups—going back and forth like that—so the film became a part of an ongoing conversation.

Putting the young women up there on the big screen and also having them in the room helped make them the stars of the event.

“These were people who are often treated with a lot of disrespect,” Glouberman says, “but at the event, they were the people you hoped to have in your group, and to sit next to at lunch. They are valued as the most expert people there.”

It might sound like an overly heavy or dreary day, but it wasn’t. Glouberman’s events never have that feeling.

“There’s a lightness that he brings to the present moment that’s just so key,” Cizek says. “It sets a whole tone and mood for the space. He’s funny, and there’s something so unthreatening about him, and he’s brilliantly smart and sensitive, and his keen sense of observation really creates something true and unique in the moment.”

As a conference designer, Glouberman’s methodology draws on techniques such as Open Space and unconferences—designs that focus on how to get participants to connect with



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each other in useful ways. At his events, participants spend most of the time talking in small groups with people who share their interests.

“If you have a hundred people at a conference, the best thing to do is, as much as possible, let them make the decisions about what gets discussed,” he says. “They’ll do a better job than a planning committee will.”

The part of all this that is uniquely Misha is his insistence on establishing a contract with the audience or the participants at the start of any event, plus a quality that might be called kindness.

“A lot of shows in bars say they’re going to start at eight and then start at nine, so right off the bat you’ve kind of broken a promise to your audience,” he says. “At Trampoline Hall, I stand on stage and tell people exactly how long it’s going to be until the show starts, so if we’re going to be a couple of minutes late, I tell people that well in advance. Once the show begins, I do a 10-minute introduction where I spell out the terms. It can seem like a joke, but it’s very real. I explain that we’re going to open the floor for questions after each lecture; I explain what’s expected in their questions; I explain that they’re expected not to talk during the show. I think all those contracts make a huge difference. What happens a lot of the time in a lot of events I attend, is someone asks a question and they go on for three minutes and there’s no question there. Most people hate this, but if you haven’t established a contract and someone does that, as a



Meet Misha

Meet and learn from Misha Glouberman at the 2012 World Education Congress (WEC), the annual networking and adult education event (this year taking place July 28-31 in St. Louis, Missouri).



Glouberman will bring his engaging style to the idea-fest Flash Point, and will also discuss unconferences during

his own concurrent session. You can also connect with him during a signing of *The Chairs are Where the People Go*, which he co-authored with Sheila Heti.

For more information about WEC and to register, visit www.mpiweb.org/wec.

Read Misha



Several years ago, I approached Misha Glouberman with the idea of writing a book together. I usually write novels for a living, but this time I wanted to write a sort of practical, philosophical self-help book. Misha was the only person I knew whose ideas could carry such a project.

Few people actually have a unique, clear and interesting system of thought, developed through years of engaging with the world, but he does. The book we wound up with has 72 chapters, each on a different topic he cares about: improvisation, monogamy, games, making friends, quitting smoking. The title, *The Chairs Are Where the People Go*, comes from a simple idea outlined in one of the chapters: that you can tell how much the organizers have thought about their audience by the way they've set up the chairs.

We weren't sure how the book would be received, but people took to Glouberman's voice the way they take to him in real life.

When I asked him the other day whether he could, at this point, define his job,

he surprised me by saying that now he could: "I'm interested in how people connect with each other, especially in groups. A lot of what I do is I build structures in which people can connect with each other, and then I oversee those structures."

I asked if having that definition gave him some satisfaction. "No," Glouberman said, laughing. "But I think I'm more satisfied with not being satisfied. The bigger point is that I love this stuff that I'm doing. I really love it and I'm incredibly lucky to have so many opportunities to do things that are enjoyable to me and that feel useful in the world."

Talking to his friends resulted in the best thing possible for Glouberman. And it's just that kind of open, genuinely curious talking with others that he hopes to facilitate for us. **one+**

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moderator you can try and get them to stop, but they're going to take it personally. However, if you make that rule really clear at the beginning—what the expectation is—when someone does that, you can stop them."

Jacob Zimmer, who works with Glouberman to run an annual conference for theater professionals, says "I think he's a genius at hosting, in a way that I don't quite believe in genius. I think it mostly comes out of him caring a lot. He really cares about how people meet each other and how ideas get exchanged, and his ability to handle that in the moment of performance is really remarkable."

And though he was initially unsure about what his role as Trampoline Hall host should involve, Glouberman has since come to understand his place.

"I knew that the people lecturing onstage were going to be very uncomfortable, as most of them had never spoken publicly before, and I realized I could take on the job of making them feel more comfortable up there. I suppose that's what I wanted to do—make things nicer for them," he says. "Then that naturally extended to the audience, too. Someone would ask a question that didn't make any sense, and my inclination was, *How can I help them? How can I help them clarify this thing that they've been struggling with?* Your audience is doing you a great favor by paying attention to you, and you want to return that favor by being good to them. That extends to everything—it even extends to thinking about how to set up chairs for them."