Priya Parker: The way to start creating transformative meetings is well before anyone enters the room, or the Zoom. Just pausing and asking what is the purpose of this thing and then getting other people aligned by what they think the purpose is. When we meet so often, we don't fully know why we're meeting and we waste a lot of time.

Craig Bowden: Today on *In Session: Leading the Judiciary* Priya Parker, author of *The Art of Gathering*, shares a purpose-driven and people-centered approach to designing meaningful and memorable meetings. Ms. Parker encourages those who lead meetings - whom she calls hosts - to be intentional in creating purpose, relevance, and connection whether in person or remotely.

Ms. Parker says meeting hosts can wield significant influence from the moment an invitation is received through the conclusion of an event. Also, the most successful meetings are those where guests are inspired and eager to participate and upon leaving feel their time has been exceptionally well spent. Those are the gatherings Ms. Parker challenges us to create.

Priya Parker is a facilitator, strategic advisor, and the executive producer and host of the *New York Times*' podcast

Together Apart. Trained in the field of conflict resolution, Ms. Parker has spent 20 years guiding leaders and groups through complicated conversations about community, identity, and vision at moments of transition. She studied Organizational Design at MIT, Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, and Political and Social Thought at the University of Virginia.

Special thanks to today's host Angela Long, senior education specialist for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Angela, take it away.

Angela Long: Good afternoon, Priya. Thank you so much for joining us today for this conversation.

Priya Parker: Thank you so much for having me.

Angela Long: We were thrilled to read your book *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. I think the subtitle is important because I think a lot of people probably think they know how to plan meetings or plan gatherings. I feel like your approach is a little more nuanced. Perhaps more nuanced than most people consider.

Priya Parker: I love that. The subtitle is one of the things our team is sort of most proud of. It's actually the subtitle that's often the most and more important explanatory note of what this thing is. So *How We Meet and Why It Matters* is kind of the essential promise of the work.

Angela Long: To start us off, how do you define a gathering in general? And for our purposes, what constitutes a gathering in a work setting and how is that perhaps different?

Priya Parker: I'm a group dialogue facilitator. That's my background. That's my training. That's still my day job. So I'm interested in the life of groups. I define a gathering as any time three or more people come together for a purpose with a beginning, middle, and end. So it ends.

A gathering is different than a team or a community. Teams have gatherings. A meeting is a type of gathering. So really looking at the leadership of a group. I'm really interested in anyone who's trying to shape the experience of 3 or more people, 12 people, 20 people, 100 people at a moment in time, an event.

I will also just add the other way I think about a gathering is as a temporary alternative world that any of us can create, any of us can attend. But a rave is different than a wedding, is different than a court proceeding. If you're a leader or a manager, you are inheriting someone else's or you've been charged or tasked with creating your own.

Angela Long: I love that word create because a lot of times people think about meetings and they think they know how to plan that. What you're getting at is it's more than planning. It's creating and designing.

Priya Parker: Absolutely.

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Angela Long: And to me, that signifies a whole other level of intention.

Priya Parker: That's such a beautiful distinction you're making, the difference between planning and creating. In a way it is an act of creation. It is the sort of future promise and at some level active influence that a group of people should come together at the same time and at the same place whether in person or virtually or remotely to talk about the same thing and share a moment of time together.

So often one of the biggest mistakes we make when we gather is we assume that the purpose is obvious and shared. I know what a staff meeting is. I know what a townhall is. I know what a court proceeding is. So often, because we assume a specific form in our head, we get too quickly to kind of planning the logistics assuming that that's the right form.

Well, before the pandemic hit a study show that the number one cause of rage across employees - rage - was too many meetings. Meetings can be very bad. When we meet, so often we don't fully know why we're meeting and we waste a lot of time.

I interviewed over a hundred types of gatherers from all walks of life. Part of what all of these gatherers said to me in one way or another is that they don't have assumed lines in their head. They first ask what is the purpose of this thing. What is the purpose of this staff meeting this week? What is

the purpose of this retreat this year for this team? Why are we doing this?

The way through to start creating transformative meetings well before anyone enters the room or the Zoom is by starting and pausing and asking what is the purpose of this thing and then getting other people aligned.

Angela Long: If you're a leader of an organization and you're used to doing things a certain way, this might be a new idea. What is the best way to get clear on purpose?

Priya Parker: So the first is to just pause and hold the assumption that of course you know what the purpose is. One practice, say you're thinking about your staff meeting or say you're thinking about a future leadership retreat, is to pause and have everyone write down on a piece of paper without peeking what they think the purpose of the staff meeting is. In a lot of teams that I work with you get 6 different answers or 12 different answers. And that's data. So very simply start by asking people what do you think the purpose of this thing is and not making that a taboo question.

The second, just if you're thinking about it for yourself, is to first ask what is the need here. What is the need for this team, or what is the need for this court, or what is the need for this circuit, or what is the need for this district in this moment. Given that need, who might we bring together, who

can uniquely address that need. Or another way to think about it, this is sort of a reverse engineer, I sometimes say to my clients I want you to plan a meeting that people would cancel other things to be at.

Angela Long: We'd all love to plan that kind of meeting. Right?

Priya Parker: We'd all like to be at that kind of meeting. Right?

Angela Long: Exactly.

Priya Parker: How do you raise the relevance and at some level is it honoring your people so that they know why they're there? They're of use rather than used. What are we actually doing this for and what does that actually look like? A purpose is not a category. So networking night is not a purpose. It's an activity where you're connecting, but for what ends? An activity is not a purpose. Sharing information to what end? Why are we sharing information? Right? What is the need for this kind of information? So often we stop too soon before we really get very clear on what our purpose is each time.

Angela Long: So it sounds like that's one of the things that people most often get wrong when they're thinking about designing or creating. If that purpose gets skipped, are there any other things that get skipped?

Priya Parker: We tend to assume that the meeting begins at the moment of entry. So when people enter the Zoom, or enter the Microsoft Teams, or enter the room. Actually, the event or the meeting or the gathering starts at the moment of discovery in the guests' mind. Meaning the moment that they realize, oh, there is this future happening. You're thinking about whether you attend or not attend, what else you may need to move to be able to be there whether or not this is something that's relevant to you, from the moment of discovery.

One of the biggest mistakes we make is we under-host from the beginning. We make the mistake of thinking our invitations are carriers of logistics - time, date, place. But actually our invitations are the opening salvo of that world that you're creating. An invitation is an opportunity to tell a story. Right? So very practically, what do I mean by that? First of all, names carry social contracts. Right? Is this a workshop? Is this a brainstorming? Is this a charette?

All of these words actually mean different things and they will prime your audience. They're all words with specific context that actually create an emotional response. They create an intellectual context. So begin by knowing that you're actually hosting your guests, your managees, from the very beginning. So really think about what the invitation says, what you call your event, and the story you tell in this event

because you're actually priming them to show up in a certain way. Rather than having everyone try to figure out what's going on in the room.

Angela Long: It sounds like you're also needing to think about what do you want your invitees to feel when they receive that invitation.

Priya Parker: What do you want them to feel, what do they need to know. A person I know was trying to create a mentorship program. It was a mentorship program for women within this larger firm. One of the blockages as they started serving employees was that there was a perception that people can't show vulnerability in this firm, in this organization. They wanted to start a mentorship program to pair senior female leaders with incoming staff. The senior leaders, the senior women, in this context were totally up for it. There was a perception that they wouldn't be.

So in the actual invitation, it was something like "Welcome to our inaugural mentorship program. We invite you to come and we invite you to bring a fear you have and/or a moment of vulnerability that changed you." Then below they had three of their senior leaders answer the question and they pasted their answers in the email. There's so much work done in that invitation. People were surprised. Like, wow, oh, this is

really something. This is going to be substantive. Wow,
they're going to show up.

Every invitation is a social contract. Right? It's these
mini constitutions. So often we under use them. We in any
context, in any work context, in any social context, in any
community context, we actually need to understand what the terms
are. What are we expected to show up and do? What side of
myself am I showing? Who else will be there? What's this going
to feel like? And invitations are wonderful opportunities to
actually begin to prime people to understand what are the rules
of the road, and do I want to say yes or do I want to say no,
and how do I show up to be successful.

Angela Long: I love the idea that, as soon someone sees
that invitation or that announcement, they begin thinking about
is this something that I want to attend.

Priya Parker: This work, I call it purposely the art of
gathering, not the art of hosting, in part because guests have a
lot of power. Most of us, myself included, are actually guests
much more often than we're hosts. So just to flip the script a
little bit, it's almost like a spiritual practice to practice
intentional guesting. Which is as a guest, when you receive an
invitation, when you receive a calendar hold, when you receive
whatever invitation it is, to just pause before reacting and
either accepting absolutely yes or no, or I think the worst

button, maybe. Just to pause and then just think, okay, how does this land on me? Do I feel a desire to go to this thing? Do I feel dread? And it's data. It doesn't mean you go. It doesn't mean you don't go. It's just data.

The second, once you sort of think about whether or not you want to attend this thing, is to either practice what I call an enthusiastic yes or a connected no. I often think about an invitation as like someone throwing you a ball. A guest has a role to actually catch that ball and then throw it back. We so often think the only option of throwing something back is saying yes. Right?

But actually a connected no: Thank you so much for thinking about me, I am so delighted you invited me to this retreat. I unfortunately am focused on this right now. But I think what you're focusing on, the way you're bringing people together, the content and the panel is completely amazing and I'm so sad to miss it. Warmest, Priya.

The last thing I'll say is the enthusiastic yes. As we've all hosted meetings or hosted retreats or hosted parties and you send something out, it's vulnerable. Right? You'll always have Bob enthusiastically responding like, yes, yes, I'm going to be there! And you're like, thank you, Bob! Part of kind of being a better host is also practicing being a better guest. Think about, if I'm going to choose to be there, how do I bring my

energy to this thing and help it be the wholest version of what it can be.

Angela Long: Intentional guesting. I love that. I want to touch on the idea of generous authority.

Priya Parker: Generous authority. You know people often think that gathering is about connection, and it is. But gathering is also about power. A good host understands that they wield power and a good host uses their power for the good of the group to help it achieve its purpose. To do that, generous authority, you have to practice three things. The first is to protect your guests from each other. Second is to connect your guests to each other. The third is to temporarily equalize them.

If you walk into a room in a group of a 100 people or 30 people, you need to actually start thinking about, okay, who knows the most people in the room, who knows the least, and how do we temporarily equalize them. In *The Art of Gathering* book, I have a lot of examples of very simple ways conferences or organizers of large gatherings help shift the norms to temporarily equalize them.

One of my favorite examples is the character in *The Art of Gathering,* Nora Abousteit. When she lays out the meal for a 40-person dinner, a few don't know each other. She says, "Welcome to our dinner. As you notice, the food is served family style."

But here's the thing. She says, "I invite you to serve everyone around you, to not worry about serving yourself. Because when you serve everyone around you, everyone gets fed."

She's equalizing her guests. She's giving them social permission to shift. Because most of us, no matter how senior we are, are entering a room and worrying what do I do here, do I belong here, are these my people, how do I interact in a growingly diverse world. That's only going to be more and more true. So a good host thinks deeply about creating and determining the relevant need, bringing people along with that need, or listening and changing the need if they're getting new data and creating a shared experience without all having to be the same.

Angela Long: We talked about the purpose. We talked a little bit about structure. That there's a beginning, there's a middle, and there's an end. Of course, there's also venue or place. So what is important to think about when you're thinking about a venue or a place for a gathering?

Priya Parker: One of the things the pandemic did for us was, by taking gathering from us, we began to see it. It's like, oh, this is how we exchange information. Oh, classrooms. Oh, we actually meet to teach. Oh, courts. Oh, we need to adjudicate. Right? All of a sudden for two-plus years many of our gatherings moved out of place and into a remote context.

So I'll talk about both the power of choosing intentionally the place if it's in person, as well as how to create a sense of place if it's remote. Rooms come with scripts. The courtroom is an iconic room that comes with a script. The judge's bench in a traditional courtroom is elevated. You approach the judge. It's inherently intimidating. You come in and you play a very specific role. But ballrooms come with scripts. Classrooms come with scripts. Think about, given my purpose, what is a place that would serve this purpose and what might block it. There are certain context in which the roles that are attributed in a space actually work against the purpose.

I'll give an example. One of the people I interviewed in *The Art of Gathering* is a facilitator who was brought in to work with a senior multinational agency, a very old agency. He and his team were brought in in part to shift the power dynamics, and to get the team to actually start exchanging information, and have a different way with one another. That was literally why they were invited or brought in.

He stepped into the room that they were assigned. There were placards right on the table. The names had been set up so that the seniormost person was at the center of the table. It was like an org chart all around the table. He looked at it and he said, a very astute facilitator, "I can't work here. The scripts, and the infrastructure, the architecture are reifying

that which you are asking me to change." They said, oh, well, the tables are here and all the AV equipment is plugged in.

He practiced what artful gatherers practice, he didn't accept the default setup because most people aren't actually thinking about these dynamics. So he called the tech teams. They moved out the tables. They took off all the name tags. And still, he said, working within the building, it was still very difficult to shift the context.

Some of it is super practical. So if you go to a restaurant, say you have a team meeting at a restaurant, you know, what is the audio like? If you wanted to do a night of stories or 15 toasts, you may want to think about a private room rather than a public room so that people can speak freely. How far apart are bodies around a table. Like a round table versus kind of like two lines on a tennis match. So thinking very deeply about place.

Then the last thing I want to say is, when you are leading a remote meeting or gathering, the role of the host is to create and stitch together psychological togetherness when we don't have physical togetherness. Architecture does a lot of the stitching of our physical togetherness in ways we don't even think. Right? You lower your head perhaps to go through a doorway. The texture of a floor changes from carpet to floor to

tile. All of these are actually giving signals to our brain that we're entering into new spaces.

In most of our remote contexts, it's a contextless space. I often joke you can't hide a bad meeting on Zoom. Right? It's like there's no almonds in the middle of the table to reach, or to grab your colleague on the way out to have the actual meeting. You're just kind of all there staring at each other.

So a couple of ways to create psychological togetherness. The first 5 percent of any meeting really matters. That's when you're setting up the norms. That's also when people feel like, oh, this is the place I can kind of talk or this is not my meeting. When people are still coming in and particularly for larger groups to make it not feel so contextless, anonymous, or big is to use in the first opening moments the chat box. Ask questions that are sort of relevant to the group but not necessarily totally about work.

So one that I love is I often ask people what's the first concert you went to and who took you. All of a sudden, you're creating context. You see the chat light up. Oh, New Kids on The Block, Bob Dylan, Janet Jackson, Madonna. Oh, wow. I didn't realize that their first concert also was the Backstreet Boys. Part of what happens is, first of all, studies show that people are more likely to participate if they participated once. Whether they say their name aloud, whether they use the chat

box. So you're creating a social permission and a context that
like we can do this here.

But the second is that you're giving people context,
particularly in remote work, of each other. So when you're
working on something and the going gets tough, you have one
mental note. It's like, oh, maybe I'll pick up the phone and
just see what happens. Like their first concert was my first
concert. Right?

So the work of a leader or the work of a manager
particularly in distributed work and particularly in larger
rooms is to continually at different moments create connective
tissue and context that allows people to know things about one
another that is appropriate within the work context. That helps
us realize that none of us is a monolith. Part of it - the
judiciary may be different - is so much of remote work, one of
the things we've lost is kind of just like the informal banter.
If you're moving down a hallway or if you're washing your hands
in the shared restroom, you're kind of bantering with one
another. Chatting with one another. Oh, where did you get your
bag; or, wow, you're running the 5K this weekend. On remote and
virtual meetings, 40 people don't need to hear about whether or
not you stub your toe. But actually stubbing your toe is the
small talk of group life.

I know a team that is a very kind of fastmoving team. They're distributed. They see each other all day long often with clients and sometimes with themselves in just like 20 minutes, 25 minutes and always like get straight to work. They started realizing their vibe as a group was kind of off. So they started an experiment where they're starting to do water cooler Wednesdays. Every Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. for 15 minutes - that's short - they do a virtual water cooler, and the principals show up which actually makes the difference. So then everyone else is showing up. The only rule is you don't talk about work.

I checked back in with that team six weeks later and they were back intact. Again, what is the purpose and what is the need. The first iteration of what they were doing when they realized that they were only like workhorses with each other was some people started to try to chat at the beginning of meetings and then other people kind of got annoyed. Again, know your group, know the need, know the pace, know what is necessary in certain moment.

So again, by paying attention to what's actually happening in your group, they realized for this group let's actually carve out a specific time where we do this. So then the next 17 meetings we have on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday we're in the mode. We're doing our work, but we're also slightly chuckling

because we know about Andre's new poster behind him and how it arrived from his mother. I'm making this up. In some level what we're talking about is creating a sense of belonging when we're not on the same space and we're not all the same.

Angela Long: Are there times when it's okay to just have less formal gatherings?

Priya Parker: I kind of want to de-tangle formality from structure and from intention. Purpose need not be serious. A simpler or more helpful word is intention. If you're a leader and if you have a manager, what is the need here? Am I accurately assessing the need, or do I need to talk to some of my people? Again ask them what do you think of the purposes, what do you think the biggest need is for our group right now. Because if you have proximity to power and you're a leader, you're much more likely to feel like you belong to a place. We tend to assume that the relationships we have other people have in different versions. That's not always the case.

Angela Long: What should leaders know about gatherings that are smaller? Say a few people versus larger gatherings maybe even up to a few hundred people.

Priya Parker: When it comes to gatherings, size really matters. Different sizes serve different purposes. So groups of six are really good for having distributed and engaged conversation. It's much more likely for a meeting between six

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and eight. A group of six is much more likely to have one conversation. A group of eight is more likely to have two or three conversations, which isn't a bad thing either. So in a group of 8 to 12, more people are more likely to talk to different people and have dyads. Basically one-on-ones. It's harder to have a single conversation, but it is possible with a well-held host or facilitator.

When you get to groups of 20 to 30, they're really good for kind of buzz and diversity. They're able to kind of move around the room, particularly if you're in-person, and meet different people. And in a group of 20 or 30, if it's not well-held, people will much more likely to go to those they already know. So you need to have more design around how to actually create cross-flow and particularly help those who have less social capital in the room find ways to kind of be at the center of things.

One of the things I often hear in companies and in organizations is like the best conversations are usually smaller. Six people, eight people. It starts really getting unwieldy when it's 20 or 100. Yet one of the things that the pandemic did is Zoom has endless windows. It's not limited by 12 people. There's no fire code. You can literally have 500 people in your townhall.

First of all, not everybody has to play the same role in every meeting. There's a false notion that 60 minutes with 150 people on Zoom is a democratic meeting. It's not and it shouldn't be pretended to be. So it sounds like anyone can talk whenever. It's like just don't even say that because it's not true. It's not a bad thing. It just depends on what the purpose is.

What leaders in remote organizations need to understand is that at some level your townhall or your morning meeting is the cultural metabolism of your organization now. So at some level it is a show. I don't mean that as a manipulation, but it is your 60 minutes or your 30 minutes where you are deeply thinking about what is it on this day that I want this organization to be thinking about, who are we, what is important here. It's almost like thinking about yourself as a podcast producer. Do we spend 20 minutes on one really thorny issue or do we try to get through as much decisions as possible?

The last thing I'll just say is we confuse apprenticeship with participation. You have to look at what is appropriate to share with a larger group, what should not be shared and needs actually some privacy. It doesn't need transparency right away. It needs space to kind of think ideas through. These are design questions.

Angela Long: We have a lot to strive for in creating better gatherings. I know your book has a wealth of information. Is there anything else that you would like us to know about your work or about resources that folks can tap into?

Priya Parker: Well, thank you so much for having me and being in conversation with me. On my website, priyaparker.com, we have a workbook called *The New Rules of Gathering.* It's a free workbook that we can share with you all to just start practicing that simple first step which is, what is the actual purpose here, what is the need.

Angela Long: Priya, thank you so much for some really good food for thought in planning future gatherings.

Priya Parker: Thank you so much for having me.

Craig Bowden: Thanks, Angela, and thanks to our listeners. To hear more episodes of this podcast, visit the executive education page on fjc.dcn and click or tap Podcast. You can also search for and subscribe to this podcast on your mobile device via Apple, Google, Spotify or YouTube.

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