



Food and Beverage Department

Internship Reflection

"A person experiences life as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. Our task must be to free ourselves from this self-imposed prison, and through compassion, to find the reality of Oneness."

-- Albert Einstein

I firmly believe that through conversation, people break free of this self-imposed prison and build caring communities. It is this belief that has driven my passion for conversation as a medium for people to learn and grow together. My internship was based on creating a series of conversation circles for managers in the food and beverage division at Spirit Mountain Casino over a three-month period of time.

The purpose of the conversation circles was to help reinforce on a weekly basis the difficult transformation of our management from a bossing to a coaching framework within the food and beverage division. In the past the managers had nothing but sporadic classes to help in their professional improvement. Conversation circles were to provide a forum for ongoing exploration and reinforcement of professional attributes that managers may have been exposed to in other formats.

When I created the conversation circles, I was embarking on a process in which I had little experience and in which I was lacking in skills. I have years of experience in persuasive discourse and have targeted conversation as the area of work that I believe will help me transform my ability to create positive community and social transformation. The opportunity to implement and learn from the conversation circles has been outstanding. I was pushed outside of my comfort zone and ended up dealing with unexpected conversations, which led to the ultimate suspension of the conversation circles.

My intent was to create an open forum for people to share and learn together. I found that this was a far more difficult process than I imagined. I found that it was very difficult to encourage participation from people who had been trained to take orders and not question. I was asking them to take control of the conversation and not be told what to say, think, or do. When I started, I published a set of conversation starters, questions that would evoke conversation. I immediately found that I needed to actively facilitate and question rather than simply be a participant in the conversation. Managers simply did not take the prompts and create conversations around them.

Since I did not know what was right or wrong or if this was even a valid paradigm, I was constantly dismayed and frustrated by the progress of the conversations. During the conversation circle on Monday 11/04/02 at 8 am my final insights from notes on the session lend some light on feelings:

“Through out this session, I did lead, I did inject ideas, I did ask questions, I did facilitate, and I did coach. Again, this is not my intention and I believe that the more people we have participate, the less I will be doing and the more they will be doing. The group of 7 a week ago Friday, was an excellent example of this. I was far less a director and far more simply a participant. I would like to develop groups of at least 7 that meet regularly so that we can create this dynamic.”

Unfortunately as my experience progressed, gaining a larger group size became unattainable for a variety of reasons. There was little commitment to set expectations for managers to attend the conversation circles. This made it a continuous challenge to get attendance from my food and beverage managers. I initially set three sessions per week so that my managers could find a time to attend. As a 24/7 high-pressure operation, setting times for training is a continuous challenge. Spirit Mountain Casino is the largest tourist attraction in the state and the team is continuously operating short staffed and under extreme pressure to deliver the highest levels of hospitality possible. Setting three different times however, did not guarantee attendance.

I continued to struggle with attendance. I decided to immediately open up the conversation circles to multiple departments within our guest services organization, the organization within which the food and beverage department resides. I also opened up the conversation circles to our Training Manager Larue Roe. I eventually invited more and more managers with little response. The lack of attendance continued to plague me through the end of the year. The addition of some new people to the conversation circles added outstanding conversational dynamics but unfortunately the addition of more people also added elements that created the suspension of the conversation circles.

Specifically, we had one individual who would not/could not keep on task and continuously turned the conversation circle into a bitch session. I found myself playing the role of controller rather than facilitator or participant. This person's contribution to the conversation circle eventually drove others away as they found they had little voice and could not get a word in edge wise. My choice seemed to be to ask this person to leave or create a direct conversation with him and ask him to stay on task and not to use the session as a bitch session. Why did I not do this? I am still asking myself this question. The answer reveals some basic personality tendencies of mine that I need to work on. I was so focused on maintaining and building the relationship, that I did not step up and address this issue. On the positive side, my relationship with him is a very important and needed part of my support network within the company. I believe that my relationship is now strong enough to address this issue with him and I will do so if I restart the conversation circles. Even though the conversation circle was not the forum for these issues, it is clear to me that the frustration and fear that permeates the organization creates the need for a safe place for managers to voice their concerns. The question is, “How do we provide a forum for both?” I do not know.

Here are my notes from my last conversation circle on Friday 12/20/02 at 2 pm that reflect my feelings about many of these issues:

“This was an interesting last session for this year and for the end of this internship and action research project. I invested a large amount of time facilitating, asking questions, and drawing the group back from a bitch session. There is a lot of concern about a lack of direction within the company, and the inability of supervisors to lead in an atmosphere of no trust and direction. It is clear that each division has differences in leadership that shapes the feelings of the supervisors within the divisions.

The supervisors appreciate a forum to vent and to share. This does not always lead to growth oriented conversation. On several occasions, I drew the group back from a conversation about national politics etc. into a focus on what we could control. I am not at all sure that I should be exercising this power to direct the conversation but I also have a concern at the same time that we will simply melt down into a self pity party and this would be counter productive for the format that I have designed. So the question then becomes, “How much control should I exert and in what form should it be?” I am still testing my role on this front.”

Toward the end of the internship, I purchased a new text that has provided me with excellent direction for my development in this area. After studying the new text *Conversational Learning* (Baker, Jensen and Kolb 2002), I have learned more about creating opportunities for conversation and my experiences in the conversation circles. I understand that conversation is based on dualities and the tension across these dualities creates the opportunity for conversation to take place. This in its self is a paradox. Facilitate or participate? Talk or listen? Lead or follow? Question or answer? Agree or disagree? Similarity or diversity? The more space between the dualities and the more tolerance of the space between dualities, the more space for conversation. This is not an easy process to create and sustain however at the same time, conversation can spontaneously emerge and create the most extraordinary opportunity for creating new learning and knowledge. I also understand that I must be willing to step up and say, “Great topic but this should be addressed in a different forum.”

I continuously test conversation and create opportunities for conversation. Unfortunately, my director and manager did not see the value in the conversation circles and the need to develop and improve the format. There seemed to be the belief that if there were not major results within two months, there was no reason to continue. Even with the distracting elements, relationships were being built, understanding developing, and the creation of new knowledge and learning emerging. Hopefully I will get the opportunity to reinitiate the conversation circles to help build community, learning, understanding, and professionalism in management.

References

Baker, A., Jensen, P., & Kolb, D. (2002). *Conversational learning: An experiential approach to knowledge creation*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.