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Conversation Circles as a tool to help supervisors learn and  
apply coaching within the management context:

An action research project

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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

## Abstract

In the food and beverage department at Spirit Mountain Casino, simply sending supervisors to classes without continuous support of the lessons learned has not proven effective in helping supervisors grow into effective coaches. This study introduced weekly conversation sessions for supervisors designed to help them explore issues and concepts involving supervision in an informal setting. My prediction was that weekly conversation circles supporting supervisor learning would help supervisors integrate and exhibit coaching attributes into their every day practice of management. During the research study, I confirmed that the conversation circles did help supervisors apply what they had learned in other settings as well as help them learn to construct their own knowledge. Unexpected experiences within the conversation circles also produced some undesirable results that did not support my hypothesis. The short length of the study produced mixed results with some support of my hypothesis and some not supporting my hypothesis. Implications for application of conversation circles are discussed as well as insights on informing my practice.

Conversation Circles as a tool to help supervisors learn and apply coaching within the management context:

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Conversational learning has evolved out of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and with the ancient human tradition of circling for conversation is the foundation of the conversation circles designed and delivered in this study. After an extensive literature review, I have found little research on conversation as learning outside of the work done by Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, (2002) in their new text on conversational learning.

Background

In the world of complex plans and processes, most successful change starts with a simple conversation between people with shared interests. Societies are transformed and communities created through the simple act of friends talking together. Talking together in conversation is far more than people expressing opposing points of view as in a discussion; it is truly a dance in which people turn around together in a heart felt sharing of ideas, feelings, and emotions (Inman, 2002). The organizations within which I have worked and those with which I have worked, consistently complain of poor communication as the source of many of their organizational problems. Yet at the same time, few have really understood how to solve the problem.

Increasing e-mails, directives, memos, newsletters, postings, and announcements seem to be common in the attempt to improve communication. All of these communication techniques

represent one-way communication and are not experiential in nature. It is my belief that the one-way nature of these communication techniques is the very reason they do not solve the communication problems they are designed to solve. The conversation circles represented in this paper are founded in group dynamics and are experiential in nature. I believe that it is the experiential nature of conversation that helps people in organizations learn and grow together leading to emergence of new innovations and sustainability of the organization.

There are four main concepts involved in my investigation. Experiential learning theory, conversational learning, conversation circles, and coaching are each reviewed in the following paragraphs.

#### *Experiential Learning Theory*

"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). For the purposes of this paper, learning is experientially based in a group setting.

#### *Conversational Learning*

"Conversational learning represents a meeting point of multiple individual voices woven into an interconnected whole. Mutual interdependence resides at the heart of valuing the local truth of each of these voices for social learning through conversation" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 43).

#### *Conversation Circles*

Conversation circles combine the experiential learning

attributes of conversational learning with an informal gathering of supervisors in a circle. I found the foundation for coming together in circle for conversation in Baldwin (1997) where she describes,

The circle, or council, is an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years. The circle has served as the foundation for many cultures. In some areas of the world this tradition remains intact, but in other societies it has been nearly forgotten [as in the United States]. She further explains, ...whatever the setting, what makes a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening often referred to as "the sacred space of council."

Our supervisors met in circle for conversation about topics involving professional development, specifically coaching. Conversation starters or questions that matter are posed by the individuals in the conversation circle or by the facilitator as a catalyst for conversation.

### *Coaching*

Ray Smith, CEO of Bell-Atlantic as quoted in Crane (1999) explains, "To create a high-performance team, we must replace typical management activities like supervising, checking, monitoring, and controlling with new behaviors like coaching and communicating [conversation]" (p. 16). Coaching is a leadership

process of developing capacities and capabilities in team members for growth and performance. Coaching is based on conversation and is not a unidirectional communication approach to management found in more traditional settings. Coaching assumes that the team is intelligent and has a substantial stake in the performance of the organization. People are treated with courtesy and respect and participate in decisions that effect their work. Crane (1999) explains coaching as,

A comprehensive communication process in which the coach provides performance feedback to the coachee. Topics include broad, work-related dimensions of performance (personal, interpersonal, or technical) that affect the coachee's ability and willingness to contribute to meaningful personal and organizational goals. (p. 31)

#### Hypotheses

In this paper I explore the researchable question, "Do weekly conversation circles supporting supervisor learning help supervisors integrate and exhibit coaching attributes into their every day practice of management?" I also explore whether these supervisors learn to think out of the rigid policy and procedure framework within which they have learned to manage. Specifically I tested the following hypotheses with a group of 22 participating supervisors and managers from multiple departments within Spirit Mountain Casino.

Hypothesis 1. The more conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate, the better they are able to apply coaching attributes in their practice.

Hypothesis 2. Conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate help supervisors be able to construct new ideas and knowledge that will help them improve their ability to supervise and manage within a coaching framework.

Hypothesis 3. The more conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate, the better they are at critically thinking beyond the rigid policies and procedures within which they have learned to manage.

### Method

#### *Sample*

22 managers and supervisors participated in this series of conversation circles. My participation brought this figure to 23. I scheduled 3 sessions per week starting on 10/25/02. The sessions continued through 12/20/02. I scheduled a total of 19 sessions and 16 were held. Participation in the conversation circles ranged from two participants per session to eight with the mean being 4.56 participants, the median being 5 participants, and the mode being 5 participants.

Individual participation ranged from 15 sessions by me to one session by other participants. The mean of individual participation was 2.96 sessions, with the median being 2, and the mode being 1. 13 of the participants were from the food and beverage department and 10 were from other departments.

#### *Measures*

As a qualitative research project, data were collected via a questionnaire provided at the end of the series of conversation circles (see Appendix A), numeric data based on

participation in Table 1, and observational data collected by me during each conversation circle. Out of 22 participant questionnaires I sent out, I received 11 back. I included a total of ten questions on the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked for a numeric score on each of three of the questions based on a scale of one to ten with one being a weak correlation and ten being a strong correlation. The other seven questions and the three numeric questions asked for subjective comments. Of the 11 questionnaires returned, three participants attended one session each, one participant attended two sessions, three participants attended three sessions each, one participant attended five sessions, and three participants attended seven sessions each. This data is represented in Table 2.

I was able to directly collect observational data from 15 of the 16 sessions held. I was absent from one session and received data from my appointed facilitator.

### Results

I believe that the short duration of the sessions and the variable number of people that participated lent to inconclusive results for my hypotheses. However, I believe that I discovered some very important insights as well as saw some outstanding breakthroughs. From the data collected and my observations, I believe that I discovered some support for my hypotheses. I feel that with the insights I have gained and a longer duration for the conversation circles, I would have more conclusive results.

There is an indication that there is some level of relationship between number of sessions attended and the value



derived from the sessions as shown in Table 2. I believe that I would need more data to conclude that there is a positive relationship between number of sessions and the value added. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 (the more conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate, the better they are able to learn coaching attributes) and 2 (the more conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate, the better they are able to apply coaching attributes in their practice) are slightly supported based on numeric data collected on the questionnaire. The data in Table 3 seems to provide support for question 3 on the questionnaire (Do new ideas emerge in conversation that improves your ability to be an effective supervisor/manager?), which also provides some support for Hypothesis 2.

One participant, who attended five sessions, provided some insight into the need for a longer duration for the conversation circles. She said in response to question 1 (Does the conversation circle format help you apply the new knowledge and ideas?), see Appendix A, "The ones I have attended have been informative but have not really been long enough to determine how I have been able to apply". She provided the one numeric score of (3) to the first question. She also said when asked about what she valued most about participation in conversations with peers, see Appendix A, "The feeling of not being alone and realizing we have peers we can utilize as resources".

Even though there was not a strong correlation for Hypothesis 1 from the data collected, observations support at least one outstanding transformation in observable performance.

One of the respondents that participated in seven sessions was on the verge of severe disciplinary action at the beginning of the conversation circles. He was highly autocratic, tense and managed through intimidation. By the end of the sessions, he began to make a turnaround towards coaching and at the time of the writing of this paper, he is now one of our leading coaches in the department. He stated in response to question 3, "Many times you gain a new perspective on items that you face daily and can attempt to try new things". My observation is that he did indeed try new things and they did work. I find this to be more than I could have hoped for in such a short period of time.

Hypothesis 3 (The more conversations on coaching in which supervisors participate, the better they are at critically thinking beyond the rigid policies and procedures within which they have learned to manage.) proved to be a difficult challenge to gauge. I did not find clear support for this hypothesis and I feel more sessions would be needed to begin to see change in this arena. However, some of the topics that evolved into conversations provided a glimpse into improvements in critical thinking. One participant when asked what she valued most about the sessions stated,

The experiences they [the other participants] have are most helpful. I find it useful when supervisors discuss specific examples of issues that come up and/or how they handle a given situation. These often become the common thread that weaves throughout the conversation.

The thread of conversation that develops suggests critical

thinking as it reflects more than simply a statement of what is. I believe that threaded conversation is a result of reflection and an indication of learning.

### Discussion

#### *Summary of Results*

My central prediction was that "weekly conversation circles supporting supervisor learning help supervisors integrate and exhibit coaching attributes into their every day practice of management". This was somewhat confirmed for those who attended 5 or more sessions.

My predictions of improved critical thinking and construction of knowledge were not well supported in this study. Further time invested in regularly scheduled sessions might provide the time to observe and confirm these predictions.

I did not perceive evidence that would disprove of my predictions. Predictions were supported or not supported.

#### *Insights Gained*

My commitment to conversation has been nothing but reinforced during the research and the last few months of application. Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, (2002) support these insights when they said,

Conversation can serve as an essential foundation for mutual trust and sharing of experiences among members of an organization. When organizational spaces such as communities of practice and self-organizing teams emerge, conversation can catalyze visions, innovations for new development, and learning. (p. 4)

My work in conversation circles and that of infusing conversation back into the organization has reinforced my commitment to conversation as experiential learning. If my intent in this research was to inform my practice in organizational development and training, I have more than achieved my objective. Conducting conversation circles was a challenge and stretched my knowledge and understanding of learning in a group setting.

As I reflect on the conversation circle experience, I would like to address the issue of attendance in the sessions. Variable attendance turned out to be a continuous concern and total lack of participation caused the cancellation of two sessions. There are a couple of factors that I believe reflect the relatively low turnout at these sessions. First and foremost, there were only 12 supervisors targeted for attendance from the Food and Beverage department outside of me. 12 supervisors are not a large population to draw off of when there are three different sessions per week to accommodate a 24/7 operation. The small population for supervisors is one reason that I opened the sessions up to other departments. Second was the lack of management support for the sessions. I believe that there needed to be a strong management statement to get the format off the ground and that was not forthcoming. Third I allowed one outspoken individual to take the conversation circle off topic. I did not act soon enough to bring this person back on topic. I believe poor management support and dilution of population due to multiple sessions primarily caused poor

attendance. I also believe that one session per week would have been better although it might have been an inconvenience to some.

I entered the conversation circle process with a belief that active facilitation would not be necessary to sustain healthy conversations. I could not have been more wrong. Fortunately, preparedness saved me some uncomfortable lapses. I came prepared with a set of questions to drive conversation in case my participants were uncomfortable generating their own conversations. I actively used these questions and directly facilitated conversations for most of the sessions.

As I continued research on this format, I found that conversation starters, topics or questions that matter, help generate healthy conversation. Brown and Isaacs (1996) state that "Strategic questions create dissonance between current experiences and beliefs while evoking new possibilities for collective discovery" (p. 4). Supervisors in the sessions responded positively to carefully crafted strategic questions which seemed to help them discover meaningful conversation. Wheatley (1999) discusses discovering what's meaningful. She explains,

I've come to believe that both individual and organizational change start from the same need, the need to discover what's meaningful to them. People will change only if they believe that a new insight, a new idea, or a new form is important to them (section III, ¶ 2).

During an early session, my following insights reflect my

learning about the use of strategic questions when I reflected, "It is clear to me that I need to be prepared with a set of questions every time designed to disturb the system and also bring into the conversation resources to share".

During the sessions, I learned that holding the group to topic would turn out to be a major task for me. One of my more vocal and bright participants took us on paths that I should not have allowed, which led to frustration on the part of other participants. When asked what she found most challenging about the conversation circles, one participant said,

I have been in conversations that I have thought to be very negative and I have been in conversations that surround issues that are in the distant past; these kinds of conversations are my greatest challenge. The biggest problem that I have with these kinds of conversations is that generally once a person or group gets into that particular mindset-its is difficult if not impossible to change the direction.

I found that opposing points of view are critical, however monopolization of the conversation by an individual will kill participation and the conversation circle format. Controlling the topic has certainly emerged as a difficult task for me as an active facilitator nurturing a conversation circle.

As I have moved into creating new spaces for conversation, I have been very careful to act as a control valve to keep the conversation on the topic to which everyone has agreed. At the same time, I believe that a forum for peers to voice concerns in

a confidential format is very healthy. I will propose an alternative format for this type of conversation if this issue arises again.

One of my concerns when embarking upon this project was my tendency to act as a content expert. If I were to create a constructivist context, it would be important for me to let others construct the conversations and their own learning. I was not entirely successful in this and as I further researched, this may not have been inconsistent with starting a new conversation format. I reflected after one session,

...my ability to question and to facilitate was critical to the conversation. I do not think that this is a created inflation of my belief in the need for me to do so. I feel that some team members have a large growth curve in the concepts of supervision and my input, as a content expert at times is necessary. As people's knowledge and or confidence in participation evolve, I hope my role of content expert will diminish.

It was heartening that in several sessions, conversation emerged as I had envisioned. The perception of a participant at a later session reflects this sentiment when she said, "Conversation Circle was great this morning! As you envisioned, the conversations simply emerged and evolved on their own". As a group matures, I believe that this is the natural state of conversation.

When the sessions came to an end, I had gained many insights into leading conversation and creating a space for

conversation. I have found that the group must come together for a common purpose or the group loses its way. Wheatley (1999) explains, "We seek to connect with and work with those whose self-interest seems to include our self-interest. We affiliate with those who share a similar sense of what is important" (section II, ¶ 2). Distracting directions must be kept out of the conversation. My belief is that a kind but firm hand is necessary to help generate the momentum necessary for conversation to be sustainable.

Given these insights, I believe that if a community or organization is not well versed in conversation, strong facilitation to create successful conversation is necessary. The reflections from my notes on the final conversation circle of the series confirm my insights. I reflected after this last session,

This was an interesting last session for this year and for the end of this 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.

#### *Implications for Research and Practice*

I believe this project is the foundation for continued research and application of conversation as a critical format for improving relationships, trust, understanding, and learning within organizations and communities.

I believe that when I further research and practice conversation, it will replace e-mails, directives, memos, newsletters, postings, and announcements as the primary mode of communication for my teams, organizations, and communities. I am committed to helping organizations and communities create healthy learning environments based on conversation. Wheatley (2002) in *Turning to one another* states,

I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well. (p. 3)

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Appendix A

Please provide feedback on your experience in the "Conversation Circles". Your input will help improve the experience for all of us and help me understand what is working and what is not working and why. Please return to me by January 6. Thank you and have a great new year.

Questions	Responses
Does the conversation circle format help you apply the new knowledge and ideas?	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strong Comments:
Are you able to model the knowledge and ideas explored in the conversation circles with your team members and your peers?	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strong Comments:
Do new ideas emerge in conversation that improves your ability to be an effective supervisor/manager?	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strong Comments:
What do you value most about participation in conversations with your peers?	Comments:
What have you found most challenging about your participation in conversations with your peers?	Comments:
Do we need to work as a team to set ground rules for conversation or simply self manage as we go?	Comments:
What can we do to improve each of our abilities to learn and grow within the conversation circles?	Comments:
If we were to look at the best time for you to attend during the week, what would that be?	Comments:
Open input from your perspective on any topic regarding the conversation circle experience.	Comments:
Will you be participating in conversation circles in 2003 and why?	Comments:

Notes. 1. Survey reconstructed for the purposes of this paper.

Table 1

Table of participants and session times and dates

Participant	Dept.	# Times	Session dates and times																		
			10	10	10	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	12	12	12	12	12	12
			- 21 4p	- 25 2p	- 28 4p	- 04 8a	- 04 4p	- 08 2p	- 11 8a	- 11 4p	- 15 2p	- 18 8a	- 18 4p	- 22 2p	- 02 8a	- 02 4p	- 09 8a	- 09 4p	- 13 2p	- 16 8a	- 20 2p
Facilitator, Training	F&B	15	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	
Participant 1, Supervisor	Guest	3		x				x						x							
Participant 2, Supervisor	Guest	2		x						x											
Participant 3, Manager	Guest	2		x						x											
Participant 4, Assist. Mgr	F&B	1		x																	
Participant 5, ExecChef	F&B	3		x						x					x						
Participant 6, Exec SousChef	F&B	3		x							x									x	
Participant 7, Shift Lead	F&B	1									x										
Participant 8, Manager	Purch	1									x										
Participant 9, Manager	OD	3						x			x					x					
Participant 10, Admin. Super	F&B	5						x			x	x				x	x				
Participant 11, Chef	F&B	1												x							
Participant 12, Supervisor	F&B	7				x				x				x	x				x	x	
Participant 13, Supervisor	Main.	7						x			x			x	x			x		x	
Participant 14, Supervisor	F&B	7				x				x				x	x			x			
Participant 15, Supervisor	F&B	1																	x		
Participant 16, Manager	Sales	2																	x	x	
Participant 17, Supervisor	F&B	1																	x		
Participant 18, Ast. Manager	Cage	1																		x	
Participant 19, Supervisor	F&B	1	x																		
Participant 20, Mentee	Tribe	3													x			x			
Participant 21, Supervisor	House	1														x					
Participant 22, Supervisor	F&B	2						x								x					

Table 2

*Correlation between conversation circle participation and questionnaire score*

Questions	Number of circles attended by specific individuals, and mean correlation score				
	3 people in 7 circles	1 person in 5 circles	3 people in 3 circles	1 person in 2 circles	3 people in 1 circles
Does the conversation circle format help you apply the new knowledge and ideas?	8.33	3	7.5*	*	7
Are you able to model the knowledge and ideas explored in the conversation circles with your team members and your peers?	8.33	7	8.5*	6	6.67
Do new ideas emerge in conversation that improves your ability to be an effective supervisor/manager?	9*	7	7.33	10	6.67

Notes. 1. Due to the small sample size, results are for reference only. An (\*) denotes one response lacking.

Table 3

*Participant answers to questions and average scores*

Questions	Respondents, scores, and mean, median, and mode of responses				
	Number Respond	Score of Respond	Mean	Median	Mode
Does the conversation circle format help you apply the new knowledge and ideas?	9	3,6,6, 7,7,8, 8,9,10	7.11	7	6 & 7
Are you able to model the knowledge and ideas explored in the conversation circles with your team members and your peers?	10	6,6,6, 7,7,8, 8,8,9, 10	7.5	7.5	8 & 6
Do new ideas emerge in conversation that improves your ability to be an effective supervisor/manager?	10	6,6,7, 7,8,8, 9,9,9, 10	7.9	8	9

Notes. 1. One or two respondents failed to answer one question.