

# HOSTING CONVERSATION CIRCLES

Notes from VAN Forum held August 10, 2004

## INTRODUCTION

Jan Hively, VAN's Senior Advisor, talked about the value of circles for structuring learning conversations. The experiences shared by the participants become the text for discussion. Everyone is a teacher; everyone is a learner. Every participant in the circle brings valuable perspectives – valid knowledge based on lived experience. As people age along the lifelong continuum, they tend to have more experience to contribute to the circle, and can share in the task of hosting circles.

Jan described the various ways in which she has recently been involved with conversation circles, through:

- Weekend retreats with an intergenerational folk school where up to 20 participants participate in large and small circles focused on a different topic at each retreat;
- Development of a ChaTTable concept, encouraging open conversation around designated tables in cafes or coffeehouses;
- Monthly Wisdom Group, a modified book club;
- Weekly conversation circle with residents in an assisted living facility.

To illustrate how easy it is to find conversation, Jan asked the 35 meeting participants to notice something that they had brought to the meeting that reflected some personal attribute. They were asked to say their names and tell what they had noticed. Here are a few examples of responses from the circle go-round:

- My backpack is stuffed with my collection of possibilities
- I never carry a purse because I want to travel light (keys and a few dollars)
- My address book reflects the compilation of relationships that is my life
- My appointment calendar is more necessary now, when I'm retired, because I'm having a hard time finding a balance between enjoying free time and making commitments to purposeful productivity
- My frequent flyer card reflects my commitment to taking trips with friends
- I decorate myself with bright colors and artwork (purse, earrings, etc.)

Then Jan introduced Dawn Lindblom as the presenter. As a research fellow for the Corporation for National and Community Service, Dawn looked at ways to attract baby boomers to volunteer opportunities. As director of senior volunteers for Volunteers of America, Minnesota, Dawn led the partnership that developed the Advocacy Leadership for Vital Aging program and participated in the VAN Leadership Group. Last year, as an intern for the Berkana Institute in Utah, Dawn worked for Margaret Wheatley, the author of "Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future." In February, she attended a national training session on the "Art of Hosting and Convening Conversations."

## GUIDELINES FOR CONVERSATION CIRCLES

As a first guideline, Dawn Lindblom asked the participants to position their chairs in the circle to make sure that each one could see everyone in the circle. People have been telling their stories in circles around the fire since ancient times. Christina Baldwin, the founder of Peer Spirit, shows schoolchildren some construction paper cut to look like the

flames of a fire. She asks, "Where do you think that this should go so that everyone can stay warm?" They say, "...in the middle of the room." She asks, "How can we sit so that everyone can stay warm?" They respond, "...in a circle around the fire." The center grounds us.

Dawn described some principles for conversation circles:

- Be present – Be in the now. Distracting thoughts drain away the value of the experience. Focus on "This is where I am."
- Have a good question. The question should be inclusive enough that the lived experience of each person can find a path to the conversation. Ask questions that interest you as the host – questions you would like to answer and hear others respond to. Try out ideas for questions with others before making a selection.
- Use a talking piece. This may be a talisman that is passed around the circle as people speak sequentially, or something that is picked up and returned to the middle of the circle voluntarily by each speaker. Dawn displayed the small glass globe used around the world by the leader who had given it to her.

Jan also suggested a fourth principle:

- Establish trust – modeling self disclosure but also guiding the group to keep what is said in the group within the group

Dawn then described the role of the conversation circle host. A host is different from a facilitator. A facilitator has an end in mind, and leads the group toward that end. The host is the guardian for the circle, protecting the process of being sufficiently open to allow what happens to happen. The host should:

- Encourage full participation
- Promote mutual understanding
- Foster inclusive solutions
- Teach new thinking skills

## THE OPEN CIRCLE

Dawn initiated an open circle by passing her glass globe around the circle for each participant to respond sequentially to the question:

"What is important to you in relationship to vital aging? Think ahead to the next 5 to 10 years. What do you want to see happen in relation to vital aging? What should look different from the way it is now?"

Here are some of the responses about hopes for vital aging in the future:

- Elders will share their skills in the arts
- We will promote intergenerational exchange. Elders and youth will work on neighborhood projects together
- We will have age integrated communities where older adults will not be segregated in separate buildings or communities
- There will be good transportation so we can get around without driving
- We will have the opportunity to learn in many ways, in many groups
- We will talk more openly about the last stages of life

- We will expand the reach of vital aging to engage those who are not active and productive – so that they can find other ways of being productive in spite of disabilities and other barriers
- Conversation circles will pop up all over the place and many will be skilled in growing these groups
- We will recognize that everything we do with intention and attention is a spiritual practice
- We will expand equity and reduce vast gaps in health and housing for seniors
- We will develop ways of creating “family” and “community” for those who lack either
- We need lots of ways to build intergenerational interaction
- There will be enough community-based services for our aging population
- The boomers will turn into good models for vital aging
- More of us will age gracefully – letting go of unnecessary material things to concentrate our energy where it is needed
- We will commit to conscious aging – being conscious of nature and our bodies as archives.

Dawn said that the same group would generate different ideas if asked the same question at another time. The environment is constantly changing. One new response will trigger another set of new responses, etc.

A circle is called when a specific intention is identified. It can meet once or several times. It is important to allow time at the end of the session to reflect on the process and on what has been learned.

The host works with the group to develop agreement on rules – for example, a commitment to active listening, a practice of going all the way around the circle before allowing crosstalk, a practice of rotating leadership, a policy of not taking personal revelations beyond the group, etc. As the guardian of the circle, the host might slow down the conversation, or bring the group back to its focus, or pause to allow space and appreciation for a participant’s emotional response. But it’s also important to stick to the time frame that has been set in advance.

## THE WORLD CAFE

David Isaacs and Juanita Brown came up with format for what they called “world cafe” after a party at their home in California. They had planned recreational activities outdoors, but it rained. They brought their guests inside and organized them in small discussion groups. What developed was a new model for conversation where small groups of individuals, usually 3 to 4, respond to a series of three questions and write down some of the key responses. After a set period of time discussing one question, the participants move and form new groups to respond to the next question. What are the results? Everyone gets to meet and talk with everyone else. An interesting variety of responses are harvested from the notes to stimulate some rich full-group and one-on-one discussion.

After many such discussions, Isaacs and Brown found that four elements must be present to create the magic found in World Cafe:

- A question that matters
- A safe space for participants to share their ideas

- Mutual listening – to ensure the importance of listening over talking
- A spirit of inquiry

### WORLD CAFE TRYOUT

Dawn initiated a world cafe. Participants moved into groups of four, each with a large piece of paper and markers. The first question was:

“How do we create integrated communities?”

Here are some of the responses written on the sheets:

- Create a sense of wholeness – where there is sharing and communication, pride, helping, sense of belonging, safety
- Encourage tolerance and respect and safety for diversity across boundaries of race, age, and ability through public policies and actions
- Maintain neighborhoods integrating housing, commercial services, and public facilities, and support services -- all of them designed to be accessible
- Work toward physical design, public policies (zoning, financing), shared leadership that will welcome all to participate in intergenerational activities.
- Develop common goals and values in diverse communities where everyone is heard and there is a common concern for wellness and vital involvement
- Create models for integration through partnerships and recognize good attitudes and intentional actions – schools, the Y’s, families, churches, alumni groups, nursing homes, etc.

Dawn moved to a second round with a second grouping. One person in the original group stayed to act as “host.” The others moved to different groups, to be with a whole new set of participants. Dawn asked the second question:

“How do we know when an integrated community has been created?”

Here are some of the responses from the second round of discussion:

- People will be working together and also having their needs met. No one will feel isolated. Conversations will be happening everywhere. We won’t have to work so hard to stimulate interaction. We won’t have to schedule meetings to talk about encouraging diversity. People will disagree and it will be OK.
- We won’t see people pitting the interests of children against the interests of seniors. They will recognize that multiple needs and interests can co-exist.
- Men as well as women, seniors as well as youth will contribute to intergenerational projects, focusing on issues of mutual concern, such as the environment. They will meet in public institutions such as schools that are open to all. People will know and help their neighbors.
- In integrated communities, we will see immigration of new residents, more participation, and a greater sense of belonging. Everyone will be invited to participate. People will have both private and public (community) space. People won’t have to live together to do family things together.

### HARVESTING CONCLUSIONS

The limitations of VAN’s schedule required Dawn to close off the world cafe discussion after two rounds of questions. Typically, there would be three rounds, each one lasting

15 to 20 minutes. The third question might take the same discussion to another level, such as, “What could we do now to make progress toward integrated communities?” It’s always important for the host to put some thought into the choice of questions. Ideally, several people participate in shaping the question.

Dawn “harvested” results from the two world cafe circles, asking for and listing pithy comments made by the notetakers. Examples:

- In response to the question about how we know that the community is integrated, we would respond, “When you feel that you are integrated.”
- Physical togetherness does not assure community.
- Definitions are important to talk through to achieve common understanding. We talked about the meaning of “community” and the meaning of “integrated”, etc.
- We thought about different constituencies and what might be of common interest.
- We talked about respecting different values – “Each values each.”
- We are seeking a sense of wholeness – sharing – sense of belonging.

Typically, this wrap-up list of thoughts “harvested” from the discussion would be used to generate some whole group discussion of the overall topic. It’s important to note, however, that the purpose of the effort is not about finding the answer, but about exploring dimensions of the question.

Jan suggested that one approach to defining the question is to place an object or image or story in the middle of the circle, and then ask the question, “What here is worth talking about?” Write down the responses on an easel pad, and then ask the group to decide which of the items appears most interesting as a starter topic.

Dawn adjourned the conversation, suggesting that there are other approaches to hosting conversation circles and learning circles, such as appreciative inquiry, that might provide the topic for a later VAN forum.