

THE CIRCLE: STRUCTURING FOR COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE



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THE STORY

ONCE UPON A TIME... A CONTINENT OF PEOPLE came together as “We the People” to consciously structure a new system of governance. The new structure focused on making individual lives better, but the process of creating it was an exciting example of collective intelligence. We the People were thoughtful together, determining a structure that was best for all. Then, for two hundred plus years, subsequent generations lived by that structure. And, even though the system was oriented to promote individual happiness, collective intelligence improved as well.

Eventually however, as people became more interdependent, the system began breaking down. It was based on competition, the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others, and adding up individual judgments for voting. Conversation was not its strong suit. The system was left in charge of itself, directing the energies of people toward mindless economic growth and consumption at the expense of the planet, human health, and community values.

What was needed in that dire situation is obvious now. The people needed to talk together. They needed to come together in respect and make intelligent choices, just as their Founders had done. But this

seemed impossible to them. The Founders seemed like special people living in a special moment.

The people didn't recognize their collective potential, their capabilities as “We the People.” Many acted in service of the whole by fighting to influence legislation or compassionately helping others. But the real need was for all to take “time out,” talk, and act together. Social innovations were available to do this.

Generally they did not question the system of which they were a part. Instead they tended to deny the existence of collective problems, or relied on elected officials, the marketplace, experts, or the Founders themselves to address them. Most people thought that the problems arose because society had departed from the original vision of the Founders. But this was wrong. The time of the original Founders had come and gone. These problems required that all become involved, that all work together on a regular basis. This simple step would mean a new system of economics and politics, a new set of Founders and a new “We the People.” To shift from collective stupidity to collective intelligence, turning back the clock was not an option. Instead, it was up to a few people to understand how this change could be facilitated, to convene the conversation, and to invite all the people to participate.

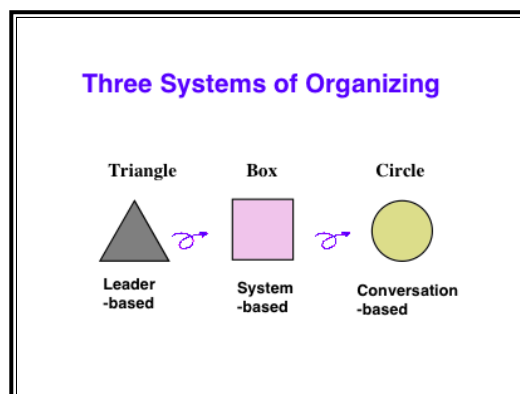
This story is more accurate than most people might think. The main inaccuracy with it is that the first version of “We the People,” words that began the US Constitution, wasn't a real “We the People.” It didn't include slaves, women, Native Americans and non-property holders. But the rest of the story is pretty accurate. We really do live in a system that is in decline, taking us where no one wants to go. There really is a set of practical social innovations by which the people can be facilitated to come together as “We the People.” Just a few people, plus financial resources, can use those social innovations to set the process in motion. And just the addition of this new “We the People” conversation would shift to a new level of collective intelligence, a new system of democracy.

THREE SYSTEMS OF ORGANIZING

For over twenty years I've been teaching seminars on “Dynamic Facilitation,” a strategy for helping leaders evoke the best from people. In the seminars participants practice Dynamic Facilitation skills in small

groups helping others address impossible-seeming problems, often issues from society like war, health care, or money-in-politics. In these conversations people often experience breakthroughs in understanding. A frequent breakthrough occurs, no matter what issue people address... *This problem is caused by our system. To address it, we need to change our system.*

There are three fundamental systems of organization whether in a school, corporation, hospital, government agency, or society. The three systems are: 1) Triangle, based on hierarchy, where one leader is ultimately in charge; 2) Box, where a prescribed set of agreements like a constitution is ultimately in charge; and 3) Circle, where the ultimate authority is a creative conversation of everyone seeking what's best for all. Today many people desire the Circle System, where employees, citizens, or organizational members evolve common understandings and shared vision, and where the best talents and skills of everyone are evoked. But the Circle is difficult to achieve.



Each of the three Systems is best in a different setting, has a different structure, promotes a different attitude in people, requires different leadership competencies, generates different results and evokes a different kind of conversation.

The Triangle, with a charismatic leader and a hierarchical structure, works well for organizations in crisis, like in a war or a catastrophe. The collective intelligence of the organization is limited by the capabilities of the leader. People in the organization contribute to the shared effort, but limit their contributions by never questioning the leader or anyone of higher status.

The Box System works well when people are independent and there are plenty of common resources available, like farmers and fishers in North America in the 18th century. Then there can be a clear set of rules that are fairly enforced. People can just go into the world and make their fortune independently. This system encourages innovation through competition rather than cooperative efforts toward what's best for all.

When people are equal and inter-dependent and the issues are complex, the Circle is best. Seemingly this applies to unions, cooperatives, membership organizations, and societies where democracy is the aim. But in practice, these organizations are often rigid Boxes or even Triangles because the

Circle has proven so difficult to achieve. Small organizations are most capable of achieving a Circle because everyone can gather and know one another. But as corporations grow to become publicly traded, for example, the organization often reverts to the Box or Triangle.

Western democracies are currently structured as Boxes, where we assume everyone is to operate as a free individual within the law. Voting and the marketplace are structured in place for collective decisions, so there is little need for conversations about the well being of the whole. But as inter-

dependence grows we need all the people to engage in this conversation and to become part of the answer. A majority vote is not enough. And it is no longer acceptable for corporations to maximize profits at the expense of the commons.

So naturally today, given that we are embedded in the Box system, we face a growing number of

collective problems like an environmental crisis, an L-curve distribution of wealth, rapid depletion of natural resources, mindless consumption, periodic banking crises and wars, etc. From within the Box system these problems all seem impossible to solve. We look to solution strategies like making people aware of the problems, educating them, pressing for legislation, or raising individual consciousness. But these within-system strategies won't make the needed difference. However, if we could facilitate a Circle system into place then we'd all be caring about one another and working together to address these problems. Then many impossible-seeming problems – like racism, partisan gridlock, bullying, and lack of shared purpose – would start going away. And finally we could begin restructuring our institutions to address issues like climate change, the mal-distribution of wealth, and depletion of vital natural resources. Key to achieving a Circle system is to recognize the special kind of conversation that's needed.

CHOICE-CREATING IS THE ESSENTIAL CONVERSATION

Each of the three systems generates a different kind of conversation. In the Triangle people learn to suppress their own ideas and enthusiasm in favour of what the leader thinks and feels. The conversation

revolves around who is speaking and their status rather than the merit of ideas. To make a difference in the organization people look to someone in a position of authority, or to gain authority.

The Box limits our thinking as well. In it people veil their attention to focus on extrinsic goals, rules, and the game-like field of play. Their thinking is directed to their own lives and strategies for getting ahead rather than what they really want, or what the society needs.

In the Box we are directed to use our judging minds more than our creative minds. We call it “decision-making.” Voting is the ultimate expression of decision-making and of what we call “democracy,” yet we see that the results of elections and our collective decisions can’t make that much difference. If any conversation exists in the Box it is likely to be an argument over simplistic strategies that benefit special interests, rather than respectful attempts to determine and implement solutions in the public interest.

Shifting to the Circle system requires a type of conversation that is different than the kinds of conversation used in “decision-making,” like debate, agree/disagree discussions, arguing, or power struggle, where one option wins. Even with “deliberation,” people thoughtfully weigh different options before choosing one.

There is another kind of conversation needed. It is like what happens sometimes in a crisis, or a “time out.” People drop their roles and their blind adherence to rules and norms. They become authentic with one another and face the important issues sharing their feelings. They work collaboratively and creatively together and reach shared perspectives. Unlike collective decision-making, everyone needs to be included in the process and unity is the only possible result. We call this form of conversation “choice-creating.”

With choice-creating groups often overcome challenges that seemed impossible beforehand... by redefining the problem, transforming themselves, gaining clarity about what needs to happen, or by inventing new and better solutions that all support. Although people often confuse “decision-making” and “choice-creating,” the two are almost opposites because judgment and creativity cannot co-exist. In decision-making judgment is used while in choice-creating people engage one another with heartfelt creativity until the choice comes into view.

The ultimate answer is to convene a new system-wide conversation in the spirit of choice-creating. And if we make this to be ongoing, we restructure our system of thinking so that it’s normal to face the collective problems and become empowered as “We the People.”

TO RELIABLY EVOKE CHOICE-CREATING

Dynamic Facilitation (DF) is a way to facilitate people to address issues in the spirit of choice-creating. It is guided by the energy of how much they care about the issue, their fears, or the passion of their advocacy, more than by extrinsic factors like guidelines, roles or an agenda. It provides a way people can release their creativity, face impossible-seeming issues, and achieve breakthrough progress and group unity. This natural unity only seems unnatural and difficult to achieve because we live in a decision-making context.

The DF’er invites each person to speak naturally yet holds the space in such a way that they talk and think in the spirit of choice-creating. The DF’er might set up the room with a half-circle of chairs facing four charts – Solutions, Data, Concerns, and Problem-Statements. These charts are used to protect people from judgment and to build a story of group progress from all comments. For example, if one person is describing an idea, the DF’er will be writing that down on the chart of Solutions. Then if someone else starts to disagree, the DF’er might ask the person who is interrupting to direct his comment to her, rather than to the person with whom he is disagreeing. She will then record the comment as a Concern, not as a disagreement, and invite him to offer his Solution as well, “So what might be an even better answer?” This comment is added to the list of Solutions. Then the DF’er can go back to the first person and help him finish articulating his solution.

Using this approach, no one is judged. There is no agreeing or disagreeing. Each comment is valued and added to the charts as an interesting piece of the puzzle. People grow in curiosity and creativity seeking to solve the puzzle. Shifts and breakthroughs naturally result and all come to embrace the final result.

I once had the opportunity to DF a weekly meeting among angry and frustrated employees in a sawmill. Over the course of many meetings they began to work in the spirit of choice-creating. Productivity and quality took off! The energy of frustration became the energy of community. They became more cooperative, curious, informed, and observant. They understood more, trusted more, risked more, and achieved more. Working together in this way these low level employees transformed the management system, culture and performance of the mill.

TRANSFORMING FROM TRIANGLE OR BOX TO CIRCLE

Witnessing this bottom-up transformation helped me to recognize a strategy for how we as a society could transform ourselves from Box to Circle. In 2002 I

wrote *Society's Breakthrough! Releasing Essential Wisdom and Virtue in All the People** about it, describing how a seemingly innocuous US Constitutional Amendment could spark a national and global coming together of "We the People." I called the process within the Amendment the "Wisdom Council." Now, years later there have been many experiments with the Wisdom Council in organizations, communities, cities, conferences and even states. We know that this process can work. It can spark the necessary whole-system choice-creating conversation. And we know it's something a few of us can set in motion at a national and global scale without needing an Amendment.

In the Wisdom Council, every four months or so, twelve people are randomly selected and gathered as a microcosm of all. Each Wisdom Council meets for a couple of days with a dynamic facilitator. They choose an important issue or are given an issue and reach shared conclusions through shifts and breakthroughs. The Wisdom Council then presents this unity and the story of how it was developed back to everyone. Then all the people are invited talk in small groups, face to face, over the telephone, or via the Internet about what they have heard and what they think. Resonance builds. Those who hear directly tend to say, "Yes, I think so too!" ... and they help continue the conversation, taking up where the Wisdom Council left off.

The Wisdom Council process achieves this magic, where large groups create the choice together, because choice-creating is the form of thinking it emphasizes, even among those in the larger audience who were not dynamically facilitated. People in the larger system tend to build on what is happening more than they judge it. For instance, if someone in the audience differs with the Wisdom Council conclusions, they have an unusual perspective. Others are interested to know more about that perspective. They listen and seek ways to incorporate it. This is not how a normal political conversation works, where you go back and forth agreeing and disagreeing and where those with minority views become excluded. In a Circle system, different perspectives are valued.

This level of change might seem unrealistic or scary. But it works and it's safe. One way of looking at it is... we just randomly select a small group of people every few months, who are dynamically facilitated, who give a talk and go away. Another way is to realize that adding the Wisdom Council process to national society or to global society doesn't directly change anything. It just adds a new conversation to what already exists. But in this conversation we finally start talking about the big issues we face, that we have largely been ignoring. And we talk in a way

that we can be ourselves, and be heard and respected, and where we start making real headway.

For example, in the heart of Bregenz, a city on Lake Constance at the westernmost edge of Austria, is a parking lot. Over the years it's been difficult to develop any key parcel of land like this because each development proposal generates a political battle. To move the project ahead without the usual battle the mayor convened a "Wisdom Council." The twelve random citizens met briefly to listen to the latest project proposal. Then the door was closed and they were dynamically facilitated. At the end the Wisdom Council expressed their unity, which was powerfully resonant in the community. They said ... *People want to be more closely linked to the lake and this project offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this. We could take advantage of this opportunity if the centre of gravity for the project were moved to the second floor and there was a wide bridge over the highway and railroad, with a sweeping set of steps to the lake.*

The Wisdom Council presented this perspective to investors, architects, city planners, activists, and citizens. Then each Wisdom Council member spoke how enjoyable and rewarding it was to be on the Council. The audience turned their chairs and met in small groups to consider this perspective. The evening presentation was more like a celebration because everyone was on board, including the developers who proceeded to modify the project plans.

In Ashland, Oregon three citizens organized a Wisdom Council in their county. They arranged for a randomly selected group of registered voters to come together for a day and a half and be dynamically facilitated. The Wisdom Council presented some simple points to the community that resonated widely... "We need to wake up, recognize that our society isn't working, take charge, make politicians more accountable, and we need to start implementing common-sense actions, like adequately funding education." This was just a one-time experiment but it generated a new momentum in the community with many important developments. A number of citizens said the experience was life changing for them. They began a citizens' movement that reshaped the town charter.

In another example, one division of the Department of Agriculture of Washington State initiated a Wisdom Council, which lamented how the Department no longer had the spirit of community it once had. With the Internet and emails people were working more in silos. From that one experience the people of the division found themselves reconnecting with one another in new ways. Later Wisdom Councils were expanded to include the whole Department, state-wide, where employees exclaimed they had finally "bridged the

Cascade Mountain Barrier,” which had always kept the department in two separate cultures.

So, more and more we are inter-dependent with others. Yet we are structured as though we are independent. This means we ignore how life really works and assume, for instance, that we can increase our collective intelligence by increasing the individual intelligence of people. No. Not necessarily. And it assumes we can vote on the best decision and ignore the minority, when really we need to create the choice together. The longer we ignore the new reality the more dangerous and stupid our collective actions become, like to threaten the well being of our children with climate change, species extinction, resource depletion, poisons in our diet, etc.

This article presents a safe, practical way to keep our current systems in place but to facilitate the needed shift in collective intelligence so we can deal adequately with our problems. But the ideas expressed here are new, not part of the Box paradigm around which we have structured our identities. So even though this approach proposes a practical safe strategy for change at the collective level, it tends to fade quickly from memory without reinforcement. We hope the reader will continue to develop an understanding of this approach after reading this article and will suggest some possible actions going forward: 1) notice how the game-like structure of our system undermines collective intelligence; 2) notice that the distinction between decision-making and choice-creating is valid and that making it opens doors of possibility for individual and collective intelligence; 3) explore how Dynamic Facilitation can reliably evoke choice-creating in small groups; 4) remember the Wisdom Council process, this out-of-the-box solution strategy, when talking with others about societal problems; 5) look for opportunities to support or get involved with convening a Wisdom Council process.

Oh, and one thing more... the Wisdom Council process is proving to be fun. For people randomly selected to be on Wisdom Councils, many have said, “This the best political conversation I’ve ever been in.” Or, “If you get randomly selected, do it!” It’s also fun for the conveners.



* (Ed’s N.) - Jim Rough (2002). *Society’s Breakthrough! Releasing Essential Wisdom and Virtue in All the People* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse).

