COACHING CIRCLES

True support for breakthroughs

The Point of Coaching Circles™

By Charles Brassard

Executive Summary

Coaching circles combine the power of action learning and integral development coaching to support leaders in creatively tackling the challenges they face while practicing the coaching skills they need on the job. If you wish to quickly expand the reach and payback of coaching in your organization, this technology is for you.

Understanding our default drive

In our quest for speed and quick fixes, most of us have been conditioned to deliver solutions and answers that produce the most immediate results. In this light, coaching is often seen as a luxury in our hectic life because it generally entails interrupting the flow of transactions and slowing our pace. This is the pace, however, that allows us to notice other human beings in the fullness of their lives, not as mere robots on the assembly line.

When we understand that each one of us encounters reality in our own unique way, we begin to appreciate the kind of care and attention needed to help others break through their limiting beliefs, unproductive behaviors or frustrated wishes to become more effective and fulfilled at what they do.

While solutions from the past may sometimes work for dealing with "technical problems", they hardly ever work for the leadership challenges people face because these are invariably rooted in relationship issues (i.e. how effectively we coordinate our actions with others) for which there is always a myriad of possible answers.

Building new muscles

Coaching can play a critical role in our development by challenging our usual way of seeing and doing things and helping us to expand our field of vision. It helps us to develop our ability to apprehend what life presents in creative and authentic ways through greater awareness, discernment and practice. Imagine if you had five trusted coaches at your service to help you tackle your most critical leadership challenges?

This is what coaching circles can offer. They powerfully marry the principles and practices of action learning (pioneered by Reg Revans) and those of integral development coaching (pioneered by James Flaherty) to create a learning environment rich in compassion and self-discovery. More to the point, coaching circles achieve a dual purpose: they help people take concrete actions to support their goals in the organization and they hone the coaching skills they need to express their leadership voice more fully.

How coaching circles work

Coaching circles are typically composed of a small group of 4 to 6 people who meet at regular intervals. During these sessions, each person uses their own "airtime" (i.e. a period of 40-60 minutes) to present their issue or challenge and to receive coaching from the rest of the group. In its simplest form, there are typically four elements to each airtime:

1. The presentation by the client of their challenge and **coaching request**
2. A period of **collaborative inquiry** designed to help the client explore this challenge in new ways
3. A period of **solo reflection** to explore what was meaningful and impactful to each
4. A period of **voicing** where people share their insights and what they intend to do differently.

Coaching request

Clients bring to the coaching circle a dilemma or challenge they have struggled with for a while or one that represents a new opportunity for them. It has to be personally meaningful and they must have some accountability over the outcome. While there may be many "moving parts" to this challenge (and this constitutes the overall context for coaching), the client presenting the challenge will generally focus their interest on the element most pressing or most baffling to them at this time.

The client speaks openly and precisely about what they are facing and articulate a clear request for coaching to peers in the circle so that the inquiry can focus on what matters most to the client.

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Collaborative inquiry

This is where the habitual reflex to solve problems is really put to the test. Asking questions to stimulate exploration and inquiry rather than to elicit precise answers is counter intuitive to most people. Yet this is what produces the most breakthroughs in coaching circles. In this element of the process, circle members use the client's request as a starting point to ask insightful questions.

What is insightful about questions is their ability to disturb and to confront the client with a possible new reality. Each thread of questions has the potential to awaken a new perspective or to shed some light on a hidden assumption or unseen possibility.

This way of inquiring demands that people pay attention to the complete human being at the core of the presenting issue and truly believe in their creative potential. The group's questions become catalysts for action, not through "expert advice" but through a discovery process that leaves full accountability and ownership in the way forward to the client.

Solo reflection

This practice in coaching circles allows everyone to make sense of what just happened in the context of their own realities. We realize in this "breathing space" that the struggles of our peers sometimes mirror our own. Similarly, their insights can spur our own thinking and our own breakthroughs.

The skill of reflecting involves stopping long enough to connect our mind to our heart and to our body, to sense our experience fully rather than automatically judge things based on what "we know".

Voicing

During this last step of the airtime, circle members share the outcome of their reflection, by focusing either on the content of the inquiry, the process, or both. They focus on what is meaningful to their own experience and refrain from discharging their last brilliant piece of advice to "rescue" the client.

For the client, this is an opportunity to say to what was most helpful and to make explicit and public commitments for future actions in the context of the leadership challenge presented. This becomes a point of departure for his/her next time as a client when the circle meets again.

Building momentum

This coaching process gains momentum during the successive airtimes and sessions that make up the full program. When supported by a facilitator – coach, the group usually builds their coaching capacity more quickly and becomes more adept at translating their insights and their skills back on the job. The facilitator – coach can also gradually introduce themes and distinctions every time the circle meets to enrich the learning process.

Over time, coaching circles can become a very powerful community of practice driven by a practical curiosity, a love of inquiry, and a deep care for the success of others. The group also learns to self-manage, and to learn together on a continuous basis.

Coaching circles can take many inventive forms. As such they play a powerful role in the development agenda of executive teams or as an integral part of the leadership programs they sponsor.

They help to build a greater capacity for listening, questioning, dialogue, and feedback in the work place and create a momentum for action and learning well beyond the formal boundaries of the development initiatives that brings people together.

About the Author

Charles is a certified professional coach, teacher and executive development consultant. He has trained coaches, organizational development professionals and other human development specialists for over 20 years in the design & facilitation of coaching circles.

Visit our website to explore how you can bring coaching circles into your practice and into your organization.

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