The Use of Dialogue to Enhance Conversation and

Empower Women in a Stressful Work Environment

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Spring 2016

Abstract

This paper explores how the concepts and practices of the Circle of Seven can be applied to my professional work environment at an inclusion elementary school in an urban area. Using various articles and the Dialogue Processes course textbook, Otto Scharmer’s Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), I will explore some concepts and practices of the Circle of Seven (CoS) and a group I created at the elementary school called the Learning Specialist Support Group (LSSG). This paper will explore whether it is possible to apply the concepts and practices successfully in an inclusion elementary school in an urban area. This paper explores the use of dialogue examined by Elizabeth Kasl (1997), Malcolm C. Burson (2002), and Ria Baeck (2005). This paper also examines the process or journey in creating the Learning Specialist Support Group (LSSG) and its initial outcomes as it relates to the Circle of Seven (CoS). The goal of this paper is to reflect on the process and examine the implementation of practices and not be a comprehensive view of the complete implementation of the concepts and practices of the Circle of Seven (CoS).

The Use of Dialogue to Enhance Conversation and

Empower Women in a Stressful Work Environment

When reading about the Circle of Seven I immediately wanted to embrace its practices and apply them to my professional work environment. This paper explores how the concepts and practices of the Circle of Seven can be applied at an inclusion elementary school to enhance conversation and empower women in a stressful work environment. This paper will also explore the processes and outcomes in the initial application of the Circle of Seven practices’ in a stressful urban elementary school environment. This paper is not meant to be a summary of the application process. I will begin with the introduction of the Circle of Seven.

**Circle of Seven**

The Circle of Seven is a “circle of good friends... [who] meet three or four times a year for three days to support and hold one another in our journeys”(Scharmer, 2009, p.152). The women first gathered in 1995. At that time the group consisted of six women. When the women first met their goal “had been to develop a program for women who were going through changes in their professional and personal lives” (Scharmer, 2009, p.153). Though their pursuits were noble Scharmer (2009) noted that initial group “realized that their own healing needs at that time overshadowed what they sought to do for others” (p.153). The women allowed themselves the opportunity “to find out what it would be like to unfold the next phase of their lives from deep within themselves and the field of their circle” (Scharmer, 2009, p.153). As friends they rallied around each other for support and development both professionally and personally. Using the CoS, as a forum to enhance internal and external dialogue and providing support for each other, the women were able to address their needs and later establish programs for new leaders, “allowing them to share the benefits of their experience” (Scharmer, 2009, p. 153).

The Circle of Seven uses practices to 1) charge the Container 2) open the heart and 3) hold the Container to enhance dialogue and empower their group. This paper will later explore the application of these practices in the Learning Specialist Support Group.

**The Learning Specialist Support Group**

The goal in creating the Learning Specialist Support Group is to enhance conversations and empower women in a stressful work environment. I saw the need in the faces of my coworkers on a daily basis. The role of a learning specialist requires a lot of patience and talking tough to be successful. The environment is that of an inclusion school lacking in support for students who have trauma and developmental needs. Imagine firefighters trying to fight one fire and three homes suddenly catch at the same time. The stress and pressure to put out the flames can be overwhelming and exhausting. Much of this time has little to do with actual teaching as much as behavior management.

In creating the group I wanted us to gather, as the Circle of Seven would, to discuss our personal and professional needs and our overall goals for the betterment of our lives. With this in mind I thought it would be helpful to not only create a circle but a concrete goal. The concrete goal, after sending out an initial survey to participants, is to create a learning specialist job description for the 2016-2017 school year and submit it to school administration for consideration. We agreed as a group that it is empowering to affect change. At the time of this paper the Learning Specialist Support Group has met three times. Twice formally and once informally to introduce participants to the Circle of Seven. I also sent out initial surveys to school learning specialists and gave out exit tickets to participants after formal meetings to gauge interests and feelings on progress.

**Similarities and Differences between Groups**

 The groups are similar in that both consist of women who want to take steps to better their lives and the environments around them. There is a focus on professional and personal empowerment and growth. The groups will be using similar practices to establish trust and make connections with ourselves and the group to create a wholeness. Both groups will be creating an intentional space seeking clarity and quality of purpose within the full core of the group (Scharmer, 2009). Beth Jandernoa, Anne Dosher, Barbara Coffman Cecil, Glennifer Gillespie, Serena Newby, and Leslie Lanes all come from similar fields of practice. Before entering the CoS they engaged in some form of dialogue within the fields of consulting, leadership, education, and social sciences. In the LSSG we all have an educational background. Some are licensed teachers and some have worked in classrooms as substitute teachers for years. Both groups have participants with knowledge of the domains they wish to focus on. In the CoS and the LSSG the participants began their initial meeting hoping to create, over time, a plan that could help change lives.

The groups are different in that the CoS began as friends, with some understanding of the inner monologues of the other participants. In contrast the LSSG consists of coworkers who do not engage much socially outside of work events. They have no deep connections and are a part of an environment coated with mistrust. Some members of the group stated a concern of others *talking about personal points or attitudes shared outside of the group*. The lack of trust is not consistent with the CoS environment. The LSSG participants will not be consistent week to week as this is a drop in circle. A great difference can be found in the environments and time constraints in which each group meets. The Circle of Seven meet 3-4 times a year, at various locations, for 3 days allowing the group to connect deeply and intentionally day and night with no time constraints. The Learning Specialist Support Group is able to meet 1-2 times a month, at the place the causes the stress, for a maximum of 90 minutes. Some participants due to family obligations are not able to stay for the complete time. Where Scharmer (2009) noted that the CoS “appear to have a tangible impact on one another’s lives even between their physical meetings” (p. 153) the LSSG is working on this goal as they develop trusting relationships. Another great difference is that the CoS members have a background in leadership and the use of dialogue, with no facilitator. The LSSG members do not have a background in leadership, development, or dialogue processes, and the facilitator is me.

**Approaching the Journey**

I will begin now with the approach I decided to take on our journey of using CoS practices to enhance dialogue and empower women in a stressful work environment. I took the role of the facilitator because I saw the need and wanted to take action. This idea has been taking shape for some time and after reading about the Circle of Seven I felt our group was possible and now I had concepts and practices to incorporate. I did not want a meeting full of venting. Though venting can relieve stress, done several times a day in the teacher’s lounge, it is not always productive. I wanted the group to have something tangible to show highlighting our use of dialogue practices that would help our school for the better. After reading about the CoS I wanted to help learning specialists grow beyond the classroom but like the CoS we had to focus on our own healing first. We needed to come together as a collective voice expressing clarity and strength. Individually we are strong, capable, and outspoken women but how will I begin to bring many voices together to create a collective mind.

**View of Myself as a Facilitator**

I was concerned as to what kind of facilitator I would be. The Circle of Seven does not have a facilitator so little guidance can be found there. To prepare for the state of consciousness of a facilitator I conversed with my internal dialogue and examined the Nine Disciplines explained by John C. Jenkins and Maureen Jenkins (2006).

After *talking* I felt that there was no way I was going to master the first internal rule of facilitation, detachment. In detaching from the group a facilitator is neutral allowing them to see the problem or group from all sides. Being in the center of the conflict there was no way I could be neutral. I need to maintain my focus on the group and not be carried away by my personal feelings. My next concern was how I would provide space in our limited time to be focused and allow a sense of awareness. In this group there has to be a balance between exploring the CoS practices and co-creating the job description. As the facilitator it is my job to maintain the balance. The CoS does not begin a meeting with a concrete goal instead they explore through dialogue the needs of the group. Intentionally unintentional. With our limited time I want to maximize the experience. I also need to allow a sense of intentionality, a facilitator must “devote time and energy to maximizing awareness that while not every decision may be appropriate for this group, yet any decision is possible.” (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2006). In co-creating the job description I anticipate some back and forth within the group. Some voices maybe louder than others. There would be some ideas in brainstorming together that would not make it to the end of the creative process. I will proceed while maintaining awareness and focus internally. Outwardly applying this awareness would be a challenge for me. I have not taken any facilitator or leadership positions in this school environment. How would I be perceived?

After exploring the Nine Disciplines of a facilitator I felt more at ease with maintaining an internal disciplined dialogue but there was still a need for facilitation of external dialogue among participants.

Relying on a more comprehensive viewpoint I researched Malcolm C. Burson (2002) and the Quaker tradition of facilitating dialogue during conflict. It was noted that to avoid conflict and express generative dialogue I must remember to listen without intending to respond, allow space for ideas to rest within the group, and show respect to participants by asking questions to seek understanding (Burson, 2002). Instead of exhibiting Field 2, debate or defensiveness, my lack of detachment would be more productive in following the advice Burson models.

Burson’s (2002) article also quoted Ross and Roberts’ (1994) summary on the principal elements of skillful discussion:

1. Pay attention to one’s own intentions.

2. Balance inquiry with advocacy.

3. Build shared meaning, for example, through exploration of terms.

4. Use self-awareness as a resource.

5. Explore impasses.

To promote a skillful discussion as a facilitator it is important to balance my intentions with that of the group. As I should have no outwards intentions that would cause distraction for the group. As a support group it will be important to question and support each other respectfully. In approaching the group respectfully we can build a shared meaning and exhibit a clear collective intelligence. Using the practices of the CoS we will connect self -awareness to enhance dialogue. My fear as a facilitator is an impasse but as a group it will be important to explore why the impasse has occurred. Having Burson’s model for successful outward facilitation and Jenkins’ disciplines for internal reflection of facilitation in my toolbox I felt ready to take on the challenge of our first formal meeting. In addition to sending out an invitation to participate in the group I sent out a survey to pulse for what our shared meaning or goal could be.

**Initial Survey**

The initial survey opened the door to our concrete goal of co-creating a more comprehensive job description. Invited participants expressed interest in wanting to see a difference in how learning specialists are utilized in the classroom and give those applying to the position a clear depiction of the school environment.

An unforeseen outcome of the initial survey was a deep sense of mistrust in my stressful work environment. When polling about interest in the group, availability, location, goals and concerns. The only concern mentioned was the support of school administration of us meeting as a group to talk about the stresses of our days. I was able to schedule the first meeting of the Learning Specialist Support Group less than a week after sending out the initial survey but as the day approached potential participants approached me at various times during the school day questioning whether I had *been given permission* to start the group. I found this odd, when do we need *permission* to gather and talk about our needs? Everyone talks in the teacher’s lounge about the stresses of the day with only moderate concern for who is listening. I did not understand the fear of us gathering as a group to talk about our professional and personal goals. My resulting concern was that if I did not reassure participants of the school administration’s *approval* I would lose them. Two days before the first meeting I sent the school Principal and Curriculum Director an email about the intentions of the LSSG.

**Inclusion of School Administration**

The school Principal has never responded to an email of mine so quickly. Within 10 minutes I had an email questioning the intent of the Learning Specialist Support Group. There was a point when reading the email that I developed a sense a mistrust. Why did the school Principal want a copy of my paper rubric and assignment sheet? Yes I am researching the application of practices for my graduate level coursework but the LSSG’s purpose is separate from the coursework. It is more about building a circle for learning specialists to grow personally and professionally. Why was our discussing the current job description viewed with such suspicion? I understand asking questions about how we plan on co-creating the job description but not my paper. Does the group name imply a demonization of our school? I thought the name came from a place of support and reflection I had to wonder if this sense of mistrust was present as a result of school administration. I was also given suggestions as how to proceed when discussing goals for next year. I took the suggestions under advisement. I answered all questions asked of me and provided the Principal with the documentation. I asked if we had support in moving forward. I was told that if our conversations remained productive support would be given. Wonderful! I felt confident in our productivity. I was ready for the first meeting. As a facilitator I had a practice prepared from the CoS and was ready help facilitate connecting with our internal dialogue to enhance dialogue. I was excited to see if the first chosen practice of the Circle of Seven could be applied to empower women in a stressful work environment.

**1st Meeting**

**Practice: Internal Dialogue- Beginning meetings in Silence**

At the start of the first meeting I included a practice the Circle of Seven uses before beginning a session. I asked participants to close their eyes and breathe deeply. I asked them to relax. To sit silently. It had been a hard and long day.

Scharmer (2009) describes the process:

During the silence, they may be doing different things internally, she (Beth) further explained. Some listen to what’s inside; some listen to the silence. “Our practice is meant to drop us more fully into the field together. Then we move into a deep check-in, giving each other all the time we need to fully bring what each of us is working with in our lives. (p. 154)

**Application of Practice in the Learning Specialist Support Group**

When we opened our eyes I felt an overall sense of relaxation. I was beginning to connect and feel the purpose of our being there. In this feeling I asked everyone as they introduced themselves to say how they were feeling in that moment. I wanted us to check in. To reflect on our internal processes and how it affects the groups. I began. I felt more felt more relaxed and confident in myself as a facilitator and was excited to see what form the meeting would take. A few people expressed group potential and a couple smiled and shrugged their shoulders. I then passed out the literature and gave them 5 minutes to look through our current job descriptions and take any notes.

The meeting began externally as I thought it would, with lots of talking. I cannot say now that it was off topic as I must be open to the awareness of the group. Then, I felt it was off topic. Participants were not focused on talking about the job description but more focused on sharing the tensions of their day. I found myself asking what, how, and why questions. Example: A participant noted that a young student had called her out of her name and ran around the room while other students were sitting nicely trying to learn. I asked her to dream for me: what did she need to help her do her best work before, during, and after this problem? From this question alone we started talking about proper placement for students, sharing information as a school to learn student triggers, and student safety. Yes! Through asking questions seeking understanding we were able to balance inquiry with advocacy and build a shared meaning as we were all able to connect to her experience. This display of skillful discussion gave us our first breakthrough on co-creating a job description beginning with our needs.

**Outcome: Charge the Container**

The most important plus of the first meeting happened at the very beginning. After applying the Circle of Seven practice of beginning the meeting in silence and connecting with ourselves internally we had experienced a similar feeling of relaxation and confidence. We were in fact charging the container. As Scharmer (2009) described we were “giving each other all the time we need to fully bring what each of us is working with in our lives [to the meeting]. This charges our space more and more” (p. 154). Through this charge, felt in silence, we brought forth a sense of connection and relaxation and we came together to co-create. In this mode we were able to experience another plus. I found when going over our notes that many points had been made addressing what we needed to make our jobs in the classroom more successful.

In teacher fashion I was making notes on the board as the discussion continued. I made a pluses and deltas graph and left a space for questions and needs seen in Appendix A. As a group we were co-creating. According Elizabeth Kasl (2001) we were in a synergistic mode where members create knowledge mutually. In this mode “divergent perspectives are integrated through dialectical processes that create shared meaning schemes” (Kasl, 2001, pg. 91). Though participants in the group are all learning specialists we have different perspectives on needs in our job description based on grade level. I am looking for the LSSG to move forward in Kasl’s model of a continuous mode describing a team in which synergistic learning becomes habitual (Kasl, 2001). In charging the Container I feel we were able to connect deeper as a group to co-create.

**View of Myself as a Facilitator**

 My major delta or concern was that too many people were talking over each other during the first meeting. Sub-conversations broke out across the room. Tables began conversing about their individual problems and not always focusing on the whole group conversation. I was very concerned that empathic listening did not occur during our meeting. After reading through the exit tickets from the first meeting I was excited to see if we could alleviate my concerns going into the second meeting. I was beginning to think that I had not done a good job facilitating but upon reflection I think I was able to maintain a sense of detachment. As well as aid the group in refocusing and helping attain a deeper connection to self and the group. I did note that the plusses of the first meeting outweighed the deltas. I felt that a practice had been successfully applied to enhance dialogue among LSSG participants.

 **2nd Meeting**

**Practice: Internal Dialogue Getting to Know You**

I planned to address the concerns of the first meeting in the second meeting. I reminded myself of how we needed to build a respectful environment of coworkers coming together as friends as had been the case in the Circle of Seven. To become friends or at least more friendly, in not talking over each other, we needed to get to know each other a little better. I decided we would begin the second meeting with a practice Otto Scharmer asked the CoS to participate in, only modified.

Scharmer (2009) describes:

I asked each of the women to draw two pictures: one that depicts the experience of a normal group meeting and another that depicts the experience of a circle meeting. “In my first picture,” explained Beth, “I thought about a particular new group working together on health care reform. I feel as if everybody’s got their own little bubble around them—their identity. “In the second picture,” continued Beth, “there’s an impression of the unique gift of each one’s inner presence or essential self. What I see happening is more of our essential selves coming through, and at the same time, we’re becoming more differentiated in our thoughts and contributions (pp. 181-182).

**Application of Practice in the Learning Specialist Support Group**

To maximize time I modified the CoS practice. I researched different artistic movements, The Renaissance, Impressionism, Post Impressionism, Cubism, and Contemporary art to have a range of connections. I printed and copied pages and set them at different tables in the room. I asked participants to sit at the image that best described their personality and share that connection. I then asked participants to share which picture best expressed their feelings at work.

I was surprised that most participants sat at the same table exhibiting a connection to the work of Monet in the age of Impressionism. I later noted that Impressionism was about a lack of detail but was bold in colors. These women are bold. When asked to connect a painting expressing their feelings at work there was more diversity among participants. Some participants stayed at the Impressionism painting, expressing a lack of clear direction. Like Monet’s paintings of water and boats, just floating. Others connected more with Cubism, expressing confusion. Our job description has been expanded a few times during the school year. One person chose the Contemporary piece, expressing a joke. Is this a school environment you can take seriously?

Scharmer describes this activity as the Circle of Seven coming to a more authentic space, revealing more authentic selves. Though I agree with Scharmer, in terms of the Learning Specialist Support Group, I believe this practice helped us open our hearts and come together as friends and not just coworkers.

**Outcome: Open the Heart**

Through reinforcing trust and displaying a willingness to be vulnerable we were opening our hearts and experiencing empathic listening. No one talked while others shared their feelings. No one talked, there were periods of silence that I didn’t want to fill, and there was a sense of understanding. Not everyone felt the exact same way about the paintings but we understood why someone else might feel that way. My semi-judgmental concerns about empathic listening were gone.

After this activity participants began sharing their true feelings and not just their frustrations within the stressful work environment. Participants shared feelings and experiences from previous jobs, talked about family, and shared goals they have for next year. There was a great sense of hope that had come over the room. This sense hope was not at the first meeting. In the first meeting there was a sense of confidence and relaxation. I learned more about them and they learned a little more about me.

**View of Myself as a Facilitator**

After the second meeting I realized we had not talked about the job description. This would have concerned me after the first meeting but I felt that we had done something far more applicable. I felt a greater connection to the concepts and practices of the Circle of Seven after the second meeting. I experienced a *yes* moment again. I was beginning to see the ultimate growth of the LSSG and the connections made to the CoS. This group was opening up and connecting as friends, our internal dialogues were creating a more authentic space to share in.

**Upcoming Applications**

**Practice:** I am interested in exploring a process Beth introduced where she plays different parts of herself to discover a part of herself she is not familiar with (Scharmer, 2009). The process was introduced in a practice of the group connecting with the needs of individuals in the moment.

**Potential Application of Practice in the Learning Specialist Support Group**

During this experience I would ask participants to sit in circle on the rug in my classroom. I would ask them to each recount a problem where they would like feedback. The problem would not have to be school related. We would then discuss which problem to tackle. Seeing as we are not our complete selves in the school environment, lots of talking tough and teacher language, I would ask the chosen participant to include how she would handle a problem as her in school personality, her out of school personality, and whomever she truly is. As we are continuously trying to develop and share our authentic selves. The goal of participants in the circle would be to help her discover a part of herself she is not familiar with by asking open ended questions. Example: what was it about that moment that made you react that way, why? This is a modified version of the CoS process that I believe can help LSSG participants learn more about themselves and what they need and ask more questions about why we do the things we do.

**Potential Outcome: Hold the Container**

The analysis of the first two meetings show that the Learning Specialist Support Group with the use of modified practices explored by the Circle of Seven have begun to enhance dialogue by charging the Container and opening the heart. I believe that the LSSG is capable of immeasurable growth personally and professionally. The first two meetings have shown me its potential.

Over the course of several meetings I believe we can explore practices that hold the Container, making connections outside of the more formal meetings, and being there for each other. Beth Jandernoa likens the Circle of Seven to that of a marriage, “I assume it’s like being in a marriage. If you’re really doing the relationship well, you work at it” (Scharmer, 2009, p.155). Beth notes that there is a commitment to not letting one person’s agenda get in the way of the groups’ collective agenda.

**Introduction of the Ashland Institute**

The women in the CoS were able to use dialogue practices to enhance conversation and achieve personal and professional growth. Eventually many of the members were able to achieve their initial goal of helping others. The Ashland Institute was created in 1998.

The Ashland Institute (1998) is described as a place that:

helps individuals, organizations and communities manifest

their potential for wholeness. We view stuck patterns and transitions as opportunities for renewed alignment with purpose. Our work opens creative and timely gateways into the future by paying attention to current impasses and emerging possibility. We are a group of long-term friends whose lives have been interwoven for decades.

All of us are personally committed to our own growth and spiritual development. In 1998, a number of us moved to Ashland, Oregon, to fulfill a belief in both local community and a healthy web of global integrity. Our office is in a beautiful valley which provides a home for The Ashland Institute and a virtual welcome for our many friends and colleagues from around the world (1998).

They began as a group of women sharing in each other’s personal and spiritual growth and now can share in others. They use the same practices developed in the CoS to develop programs for women and young girls. One program in particular caught my attention as I explored its connection the LSSG, Coming Into Your Own. It is a leadership development program for women transitioning. The program assists them in understanding the “relationship between the inner dynamics and the outer life/work challenges” (1998). As a nonprofit organization the Ashland Institute has provided assistance to many women and young girls seeking understanding and personal and professional growth.

 **Expanding Outside of the Circle of Seven**

 The Circle of Seven practices have been a strong starting point for the Learning Specialist Support Group but I believe that we can incorporate knowledge from other Circles. Through research I came across a group similar to the LSSG in that they are building as well. The CoS already seemed so accomplished in their fields I wanted another perspective to connect the LSSG experiences with.

**Introduction of the CirlceBeing**

 Ria Baeck (2005) reminded me that groups centered on collective knowledge like ours are not built at once. Her paper details the story of the CircleBeing. Her circle began with four friends. CircleBeing focuses on creating a strong container as the means for deeper connections to self and the world. Making connections to self, relationships, the group, and evolution (Baeck, 2005).

Baeck (2005) asserts that:

We need to go through different layers or phases. We need to broaden our focus before we finally arrive where the magic can take place.

These layers are nested in each other and depend on one another. They are like holons. The layer or the inner movement of accepting ‘transforms and includes’ the inner movement of acknowledging. It is not possible to turn this upside down. The direction of development through these different layers is one of unfolding more and more authenticity. An invitation to each of us! (p.5)

In Baeck’s group there is a deep sense of connection to knowing or revealing the inner self as a way to make deeper connections with other members and those outside of the circle. This practice was briefly mentioned when discussing the CoS but Baeck goes into greater detail on how to create a strong container with those less versed in dialogue processes. Ria Baeck is a psychologist and did not mention in her paper the professions of those in her circle. A potential practice of the CircleBeing can be applied to the LSSG.

**Practice: A New Silence**

We can begin to reveal our authentic selves as it connects to the group in silence and reflection of who we were, who we are, and who we want to be. Baeck (2005) describes “if we want to feel, to sense, to presence what life is telling us about the group’s higher or Authentic Purpose we need a lot of group silence” (p. 9).

**Potential Application of Practice in the Learning Specialist Support Group**

I believe that the Learning Specialist Support Group can discover our authentic selves in the process of creating a job description for next year. It will also challenge us to ask ourselves more difficult questions like do we want to stay in the stressful work environment. Through the group feeling a sense of empowerment and support we can make a clear decision based on self-awareness. If some choose to stay they then know they have a description in place and a LSSG that will meet regularly to reinforce the sense of empowerment and collective wisdom.

In considering goals for next year the LSSG will need to begin working from a higher purpose. This year we had something concrete to focus on but this model is not sustainable. We need to consider that we are capable of more. I believe that we are. I believe that we can empower each other to spread our professional wings and help eventually create groups in other schools if we leave this one. The Circle of Seven eventually established strong programs some through the Ashland Institute focusing on empowerment of women in management positions using Sensing practices they found helpful. These programs were conceived with the CoS.

The LSSG like the CircleBeing described by Raeck is just starting but it is important to look toward the future and eventually move from Sensing to Prescening. It will not be easy by any means. At this time the LSSG has a notion, a few articles, and textbooks as guides but maybe one of use through this process will be inspired to become a coach and come back and teach us a few things.

Baeck (2005) notes:

We needed a lot of training, and a lot of courage and willingness to voice our own sparks of wisdom and to see other’s information as wisdom too. To see this is still relatively easy to accomplish, but to act on it, to arrange our life according to it... we are still struggling with that (p.9).

**Potential Outcome:**

The start of the group is the scary part but there is something that rings true in letting go of the fear. In letting go together we are attaining much more. We can get more back because after the fear is gone there is an abundance of courage between each individual participant. I can see it in the faces of the LSSG we are in it together and are prepared to work together to accomplish the first goal of many.

To this end once the group is more established I believe I will able to take a step back from facilitating so we can share in a more collective wisdom. I can see an evolution in process, product, and collective leadership occurring within the LSSG.

Baeck (2005) states:

 The collective will be leading. The group will lead itself, together. No more one guy

who is supposed to know it all or to know it better or to have the brightest vision. But

it will be a celebration of diversity on the highest level of business and leadership.

And throughout in society: everywhere people coming together in circles to improve

their lives, their work, their neighborhood. Because they love it, they are motivated,

and they enjoy creating together (p.4).

The group leading itself is a goal for the LSSG. I also feel that we can also incorporate more diversity in the group by asking paraprofessionals to participate.

**Change in Dialogue- Was there a shift from Conversation to Enhanced Dialogue?**

Fields 1 and 2 of Otto Scharmer’s Dialogue Model does not describe dialogue but conversation. I believe that the LSSG may have started in a more polite and complicated state but I feel that through the practices we have applied up to this point we have experienced Field 3, empathetic listening. I believe that we are at a point where we can listen to each other and move into a deep collective wisdom in co-creating the job description.

**Empowerment of Women**

Submitting the job description to school administration can be a form of empowerment as the feeling of helplessness can ebb after participation in the Learning Specialist Support Group. As we are learning more about each other and moving toward a collective wisdom we are empowering each other. We will submit a clear and comprehensive Learning Specialist job description to school administration within the next month. It is then our hope that it will be used to explain the position to future applicants. After two meetings I see a great deal of confidence in the faces of participants in the LSSG. I have been asked several times when the next meeting is. There is excitement and refreshment in experiencing a connection. I do not think one person leaves our meetings feeling defeated and powerless. I believe it is quite the opposite. We are gaining strength from each other taking with us the LSSG circle as we move about in our lives. I believe that is the marriage Beth describes in the CoS. The feeling that we are not alone and will always have a group to have your back. I think we are brave enough the Principal to a meeting to dispel any feelings of mistrust.

**Conclusion**

 Modified practices of the Circle of Seven can be applied to enhance conversation and empower women in a successful work environment. After the second meeting I established two connections between the Learning Specialist Support Group and the Circle of Seven. This proves that the concepts and practices of the CoS can be applied to enhance conversation and empower women in a stressful work environment. Through the use of dialogue practices the CoS used to 1) charge the Container 2) open the heart and 3) hold the Container to enhance dialogue and empower its members the LSSG has found a beginning.

This paper detailed the first two meetings and its outcomes. Through the use of practices explored by the Circle of Seven the Learning Specialist Support Group has begun to charge the Container and open the hearts of its participants. We will continue to hold the container this practice goes into the idea of a marriage, you have to work at it.

The Learning Specialist Support Group is at the beginning of its journey of self-discovery. Since self-discovery is a never ending story I believe we have great potential for growth both personally and professionally.

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**Appendix A**

Learning Specialist Support Group

Notes from First Meeting

Pluses (+) Deltas ( -)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| No lesson planning- freedom every class | Negotiating with students  |
| “Aha” moments w/ students (difficult students) | More responsibility and work ( than last year) |
| Students feel safe in a 1-1 with learning specialists | No **ME** Time -Keeping difficult students  |
| Assisting teacher- not fully responsible | Trickle down effect- too many expectations on teachers- down to learning specialist |
|  | Too many interruptions during the day- disrupting the class **Our** responsibility  |
|  | Feeling like you’re not doing your job when students run out- Too many runners  |

What we **Need** to help us do our job:

 Need more student support officers- spread too thin

Need a full time nurse

School police

Definition on what is an inclusion school

Consistent job description- Teachers, Learning specialists, and Admin need to be on the same page

What trainings can we get for trauma students? Know what language to use

Knowing Triggers/ Backgrounds to support students and keep staff safe

Sometimes it’s necessary to have the lower group when you see the struggle

Admin support?

Questions

If safety is #1 what resources do we have?

Is this the proper placement for some students? Accommodations?

How many times does a student have to react to get results?

Innovation school?

Learning specialist/ teacher safety concerns?