



Circle Structure: Utilizing the Wisdom in the Room

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How do we know where in the school system we should focus in order to make the most effective change? My answer is “at the heart level.” Which hearts? The system is greater than the sum of its parts and the system is only as good as its weakest member. So to have a strong system heart, we need to focus on the hearts of the weakest members and address their needs. There are two basic things we can start doing tomorrow that will immediately begin this invaluable work.

Last night I went to an orientation for volunteers at the San Luis Obispo County non-profit Restorative Partners. This program brings volunteers into jails, prisons, and juvenile halls in the county to do activities alongside inmates. One former inmate, who has stayed involved in the program by becoming a trained facilitator of their Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP), said: “I was shut away from society and I thought they had forgotten me. I felt like I no longer existed. When these [Restorative Partners] programs became available it made a huge difference for me. People I didn’t even know came to enjoy activities with us. It created a bridge for me so that I could imagine being a part of society again.”

A group of 20 people had come together because each one of us care and want to make a difference in people’s lives and in a system. By the end of the two and a half hours we understood that almost every offender who ends up in prison was first a victim of some violence or injustice. Without access to loving guidance and good programs to keep them mentally, emotionally and socially healthy, these young victims can become offenders.

Educators have an important role in helping young people enter mentally, emotionally and socially healthy situations. Restorative Partners boasts a tremendous success rate. When an incarcerated man, woman, or youth chooses to access their programs, they have access to the support they need to overcome circumstances and create a life they are proud of. I think the key is to realize that there are cries for help before people become offenders and if we can catch it early we can get people help earlier. Imagine a series of gatherings of educators where the focus of discussion and action is to identify indicators of cries for help and existing support we have access to so that we can channel those wanting help to the help that is available.

I have two children who went through public school. My first born was identified gifted and talented and there was a program for that, which she had access to. It only really pertained to her intellectual talent,

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though. When she became a troubled teen and I recognized her cries for help I was not equipped to respond. I put myself through a wonderful training program (for parents) but she was not in a place to accept help from me. She didn't trust me. The one who got through to her was her high school English teacher and school newspaper advisor. He encouraged my daughter to write and modeled a way of accepting all of her that stuck in her mind. That teacher planted seeds that over several years sprouted and grew. Writing and reading were her outlets. My daughter is now becoming a high school English teacher and brings enormous compassion to the task.

My second child is profoundly Deaf, so I became very familiar with the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) and Individualized Education Plan (IEP). My experience with them was wonderful. I found them very helpful. At the same time, I yearned to have every child receive an IEP because every child deserves one. Every child is unique and special. When we do not stop, even annually, to look at the areas on an IEP for a student, we miss those clues. We miss the opportunity to serve their needs.

How do we make incremental changes within the system to better serve needs? I have worked on the question – or I should say this question has worked on me – for years. I was a member of a state-wide parent organization for over ten years, and this organization, together with California Educators of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CAL-ED), would jointly hold a conference for all stakeholders so that parents and educators were in the room together for a weekend. It was extremely successful. During that time I found the question “How do we improve collaboration with all of these members of the system in the room?” I watched people arrive, listen to key-note speakers, go to break-out sessions and learn, but the most profound conversations were in the hallways and bathrooms between sessions – and there was never enough time to finish them.

Attending a NEXUS for change conference somewhere around 2005 changed my life. There were 300 people in attendance and graphic recorders harvested all of the activity onto large white banners of paper on the wall throughout the three-day conference. I sat in circle with 150 people at one point and experienced World Café, Open Space, Future Search, Theory U, and Community Weaving – a multitude of very successful methodologies for harvesting the wisdom in the room. I met facilitators of the Art of Hosting; I met authors, educators, activists, and caring citizens from all walks of life – all of whom were wanting to midwife the emerging future waiting to be born. It changed my life because this is where I feel “home.” I had found the work I will do and the way I want to practice for the rest of my life.

I want to have a say. Everyone does. I want my values represented when a system is created or improved. Everyone does. So how do we do that? How do we honor the values held by everyone being served in a system? As I practice the Art of Hosting, I learn that it is about listening. It is about giving every voice an equal opportunity to speak. It is about being very flexible so that we can change course when we need to. It is about paying attention to clues and stopping to ask what is emerging. It is about feeling and caring.

I used to work in a corporate environment where I often did not take time to talk to people because I wanted to get things done. And I did get things done. I met metrics and I won awards. I got promoted and I was given tremendous responsibility. I accomplished a lot. But after years of accomplishment, when my 25 corporate years were done, I had built very few significant relationships. I could solve problems and puzzles and I could win games with strategy but I couldn't navigate a social circle. I

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wanted to fit in but never felt like I did. I longed for circle and there were no circles in corporate structure.

When I fell into learning about systems through a network I joined around the time I attended the NEXUS conference, I began to understand how systems work and was able to see how the structure of a social system (its hierarchy, rules, agreements, guiding principles and values) influences behavior. I learned that by simply rearranging the chairs in the room and creating an agreement and an invitation while modeling desired behavior, I could have an enormous impact on people's willingness to say what they were thinking.

In my teen years I had the privilege of attending a youth group that a friend invited me to. Because of her invitation, I attended that youth group throughout junior high and high school and I experienced circle. I experienced a safe space where I was able to sit among peers and express my voice. Nothing in my teens was more important to me than that opportunity to sit in that circle. When I attended NEXUS I recognized that feeling even though I didn't connect it at the time.

I want to offer two things. The first is very simple. Circle. Any teacher can hold circle inside their classroom at any time. Any PTA can host a circle. Any school principal can host a circle. I welcome you to reach out to me in the comments section if you would like to discuss Circles directly. Second, I want to offer the idea that stakeholders come together as a system on a regular basis to facilitate feedback. Feedback is defined as the ways the system sees itself and its level of functioning. When we have access to personal stories, concerns, ideas, and observations (data collecting), we can receive inspiration for improving the system. How we convene when we come together will depend on what we wish to accomplish. Begin in circle.

About the Author

Lori Sortino hosts circles and teaches circle structure. She is a practitioner of a variety of methodologies and practices for deepening relationships and creating more meaningful lives. Her interests include Large Scale Change Methodologies and Participatory Leadership, Organizational Development, Systems Thinking, Whole Language Learning Systems, Bio-Metaphysical Energy Systems Therapy, Artistic Expression, American Sign Language, and Being in Nature.