

# Coaching Circles™: Unleashing the Creative Power of the Group

By Charles Brassard

Executive Summary - Coaching circles combine the power of action learning and integral coaching to support leaders in creatively tackling the challenges they face while practicing the coaching skills they need on the job. This methodology has the potential to quickly expand the reach and payback of coaching in your organization and to extend the benefits derived from the leadership or management development programs you offer.

## Understanding our default drive

One of the most common sources of resistance to using coaching in organizations is time. People genuinely feel under pressure to produce results and to provide answers to the problems that are emerging before them hour to hour, day to day. Coaching is often seen as a luxury in a manager's hectic life. What this pace promotes, however, is a conditioned response to the vagaries of life: problems need solutions; questions need answers. And most of us have been rewarded all of our lives to react to problems and questions in that way because "solving" (and solving fast) is what is valued. We conveniently forget that the lessons from our experience (i.e. what worked, what didn't work), the reasoning we applied, and the emotions that colored the situation was likely quite different than what the person we wish to help is facing

now. It's a lot more efficient to lob a few potential solutions and move on to the next thing. And, once in a while, it will generate a reasonable way forward and earn us the gratification we are looking for.

While this may sometimes work for dealing with "old" or recurring problems, it hardly ever works for new and emerging problems and the creative responses they entail. This isn't just a function of things changing so fast around us; it's a function of the unique way in which we each encounter reality as human beings. How the world shows up for us as we face the challenge of the moment determines our field of vision and possible actions. It is heavily biased with our own beliefs and interpretations shaped over years of trial and error. In other words, the narrative we live into has produced our own sense of identity and our conditioned responses to life unfolding.



So, how can we pretend to know all of that when we summon up a ready made answer to what is ostensibly a fairly complex set of conditions, both inside and outside the person we are trying to help. The leadership challenges facing people are rarely puzzles looking for a single missing piece. They mostly deal with human relationship issues and the breakdowns that come from a lack of coordination in our actions. Our unique way of being in the world means that we each meet these challenges in distinct ways. The greatest

gift we can receive is one that challenges our usual way of seeing and doing things and helps us to expand our horizon of possibilities. This is the lasting gift of coaching because it builds a sustainable capacity to apprehend what life presents in creative and authentic ways, i.e. to explore and create new narratives.

## Building new muscles

Imagine if you had five or six trusted coaches at your service to help you tackle your most critical leadership challenges? This is what *Coaching Circles* can offer. These circles powerfully marry the principles and practices of action learning (pioneered by Reg Revans) and those of integral development in coaching (pioneered by James Flaherty) to produce a learning environment where participants openly explore the critical leadership challenges in their role with the support of trusted peers. In the action learning tradition a small group of 5 or 6 people comes together to meet on a regular basis. During these meetings, each person successively 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 (using a 60 minute air time for example):

1. The presentation by the client of the issue or *challenge* they are facing (5-10 minutes);
2. A period of *collaborative inquiry* designed to help the client apprehend this challenge in new ways and generate appropriate and practical future actions (35-40 minutes);
3. A period of *reflection* where everyone sits quietly to ponder what they learned from this exploration, i.e. how

this particular challenge resonates with their own situation, what they better understand about the organization, what struck them about the process, etc. (5-10 minutes); and

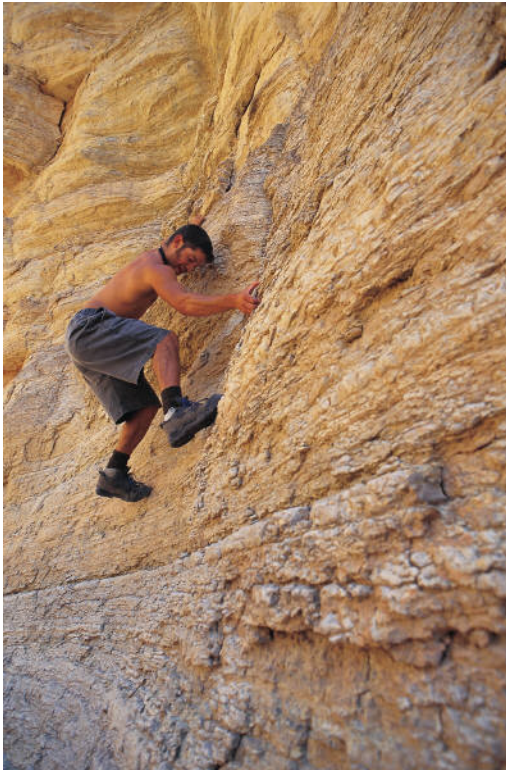
4. A period where, in turn, participants *voice* their own insights and observations and where the client highlights to the group what has shifted in their perspective and what he/she intends to do with regard to what was explored (5-10 minutes).

Let’s take a quick look at what is at work within each of these elements to underscore how the coaching approach can yield powerful results for participants using this process.

### The challenge

What works best is when people bring forward to their coaching circle a dilemma or challenge they have struggled with for a while or one that represents “new territory” for them (e.g. an unfamiliar assignment or a new opportunity). This must be truly meaningful and important to them and where they have a degree of accountability over the outcome. While there may be many “moving parts” to this challenge (and this constitutes the overall context for coaching), the client will generally focus his/her interest on the element most pressing, most demanding or most baffling to them at this time. Their ability to speak openly and precisely (i.e. with examples) about what they are facing or about the questions they are sitting with will contribute greatly to setting the scene for the coaching process to begin. As such, articulating a clear request for coaching to peers in the circle is critical to maintaining the focus of the inquiry on what matters most to the client. Over time, some degree of continuity in the context for coaching, (e.g. same overarching project or

challenge) helps circle members to more easily observe patterns in behaviors or responses and to make assessments that may be critical to the development process of the client.



Technical issues that require expert knowledge do not work here. Invariably, even under the guise of a technical issue, most topics clients bring forward in circles focus on people issues, i.e. how to get things done, how to lead change, how to deal with conflicts and resistance, how to best communicate, etc. This is where our own unique and preferred way of doing things meets the unique and preferred way of others. The potential solutions are as numerous as there are people involved! In this context, the choice and presentation of the topic is very important to the process. Understanding this also gives more credence to pursuing a coaching rather than a problem solving approach.

## The collaborative inquiry

This is where the habitual reflex to solve problems is really put to the test. Asking questions to stimulate exploration and reflection for their own sake is counter intuitive to most people who have come to expect that questions should lead to answers. 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 others with a possible new reality. They are invitations to look in unfamiliar places, to peek outside the box of their habitual reactions, to step outside of their comfort zone. Each thread of questions has the potential to awaken a new perspective or to shed some light on a hidden assumption or limiting belief.

This way of inquiring demands that people pay attention to the complete human being at the centre of the presenting issue (i.e. with their own thoughts, feelings, capacity for action, relationships and external resources) 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. It honors the fact that *they* are the expert in their own life. Conversely, as a client, the more one suspends their need to demonstrate what they "know" and embrace the vulnerability this entails, the more they will be able to dive in the inquiry with unabashed curiosity.

This kind of coaching requires both self discipline (to avoid delivering what we believe is the perfect solution) and a shared commitment to supporting each other using the collaborative inquiry

approach. The circle then serves a dual purpose: helping people to take practical actions to address their leadership challenges AND building the coaching skills needed to intervene more powerfully in the systems (i.e. organizations, teams, etc) they inhabit. By coaching skills, we mean the ability to listen with empathy, to ask insightful questions, to make grounded assessments, to offer powerful distinctions and, to the extent needed, to design useful practices. It is the constant honing of these skills inside and outside circles that eventually build proficiency and eventually dissolves the perennial excuse of not having enough time to coach others. Coaching can then be a process we integrate to the way we lead as opposed to something we solely use only in formal development efforts.

## The reflection

Pausing to reflect is often another perceived luxury in our fast paced lives! This practice in coaching circles allows everyone to make sense of what just happened during the process of inquiry and to make explicit connections to what they face in their own lives as leaders. We realize in this space that the struggles of our peers are sometimes the mirror of 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 give voice to what we already know. It also lies in seeing an opportunity to learn from everything we encounter. It helps to ask ourselves: "How can I look at this experience in more discriminating ways?" There is no better place to develop the muscle of pausing and reflecting than in this structured but convivial setting. With practice, stillness becomes a friend

(stopping is an action!) that can be summoned in the midst of the chaos and confusion we likely experience during a stressful day.

## The voicing

During this last phase of the airtime, circle members share the outcome of their reflection, highlighting what they have learned or what has resonated with them during the process. These either focus on the "content" of the inquiry or the process, or both. Circle members focus here on what is meaningful to their own experience and refrain from discharging their last brilliant piece of advice to "rescue" the client. This requires trust in the value and power of the process, an attitude groups consistently embrace in little time.

For the client, this is an opportunity to provide feedback to peers about their contribution 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 that make up the full experience. When supported by a learning 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 learning coach can also gradually introduce themes and distinctions every time the circle meets to enrich their learning process.

When coaching circles meet regularly (every 6 to 8 weeks), there is an opportunity to build a very powerful community of practice driven by a

practical curiosity, a love of inquiry, and a deep care for the success of others. With time, the group can learn to function effectively on its own, able to self-regulate, self-correct and learn on a continuous basis.



## Circles in the broader learning and development agenda

Coaching circles are a potent technology in the learning and development agenda of any organization or as an intricate part of executive or management development programs they deliver. Our experience in leading coaching circles™ for years in both the private and public sectors points to a number of key synergies:

- Coaching circles offer an exclusive vantage point from which to observe program participants in “interaction” and to provide just-in-time development feedback.
- The learning and coaching skills developed by peers inside circles also enhances the quality of their involvement in other parts of the program, i.e. through greater capacity for listening, questioning, dialogue, and feedback.
- Coaching circles create momentum for action and learning especially when held at regular intervals between more formal learning sessions or modules associated with a program (even through teleconferences).
- Coaching circles create enduring networks of people that support each other in their leadership practices over time, often well beyond the formal boundaries of the development program that brought them together.
- Coaching circles strengthen teams because they make it possible for members to show up in their full humanity; this creates greater understanding, compassion and the capacity to elicit their full contribution to the success of the team.

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The author is a certified professional coach, teacher and executive development consultant. His most recent published contributions include book chapters in “The Future of Executive Development”, (Executive Development Associates, 2005), “Leading Organizational Learning” (Jossey-Bass, 2004) and “Action Learning Worldwide” (Palgrave, 2002).

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