

Creating a New Culture of Learning Together

Bob Stilger, The Berkana Institute

I'll always remember a short conversation, back in the late 80s, when I was hosting a conference designed to stimulate new cross-cultural partnerships between the Swedish Factory Crafted Housing Industry and people working in the timber industry in the Northwestern Part of the United States. I'd convinced the director of the Washington State Energy Office to be a bit innovative. The innovation, in this case, was having people in the plenary sessions seated at round tables, rather than audience style, and inviting them to talk with one another. A faculty member from the University of Washington came up to me at one of the breaks, eyes wide open, and said, "This is amazing—this sitting at tables. We can see each other and talk with each other." A vision passed through my mind of decades of him speaking from the front of a lecture hall, never realizing how much more people would learn if they could talk with each other rather than just listen to him.

We *have* shifted—at least some of us have. We've realized that we know more collectively than we do individually. We have begun to understand that knowledge is created and shared not in a cathedral but in a bazaar.¹

Each of the different processes discussed in this issue—World Café, Circle, Open Space, Dance and others—are not merely processes for conversation or knowledge creation. They are living models for how the world actually works. They are models of the whole system. When I sit down with Christina Baldwin or Juanita Brown or Harrison Owen or Toke Moeller, they'll quickly let me know that their work is much more than process—it is a representation of how the world is. The world is neither static nor complete. It thinks and feels and senses and learns itself into existence through our conversations with each other. These conversations, themselves, are part of a co-creative process.

For some time now, The Berkana Institute has been experimenting in this field. Since our founding in the early 90s we have embraced a living systems approach to leadership. We've said that leadership works like life rather than like a machine. And we have committed ourselves to inviting people into this exploration and helping them share the fruits of their learning. In this living systems approach to leadership, relationships and the creation of interconnected systems are emphasized. It recognizes that it is more important to pay attention to what is happening right now, in front of us, than it is in trying to predict the future. A living systems approach requires that we

- Nourish a clear organizational identity.

¹ See Raymond, E. S. (1999,2001). *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by An Accidental Revolutionary*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly. This book, while specifically examining Open Source software, is an excellent way of understanding new forms of knowledge creation.

- Focus people (whom we are connected to) on the bigger picture.
- Demand honest, forthright communication.
- Prepare for the unknown.
- Keep meaning at the forefront.
- Use rituals and symbols.
- Pay attention to individuals.²

A living systems approach suggests that since people are not parts of a machine which perform functions upon command, they will act and react in unpredictable and often wonderful ways.

More than anything else, a living systems approach requires that the people in any system find ways to engage in deep, meaningful conversation with each other. When people come together with the intent to listen to each other, to ask real questions and provide true responses, a more accurate picture of the whole begins to emerge. More importantly, perhaps, people in the dialogue begin to get more clear about who they really are and what they are called to do.

We nourish each other through our conversations.

In 2000, we launched an initiative called *From the Four Directions*. It was based on the simple notion that the best way for people to get clarity and courage to step into the leadership that was calling them in the world was to gather together in Circles of conversation with other leaders who were in the same question. *From the Four Directions* was well timed. People all over the world were beginning to say, let's just sit down and learn how to talk with one another. Initially using Circles, and then broadening out to any form of group conversation, we began to invite people into intimate fields of sharing.

There was, of course, great variety in terms of what happened to people as they participated in these circles. The general theme is that people found more courage to define and follow their calling. One doctor found the courage to leave a safe medical practice and move his work towards a healing center. One young activist walked out of a safe job with local government to form an innovative community organizing NGO. Each story is different – but the common theme is that people found and followed their dreams.

Each circle's pattern was different. Some ended in six months, others continued on for years – and are still going. Sometimes people got frustrated because they wanted to turn a conversation circle into an action group and some did go on to undertake group actions. Actual direct connections between circles were

² From *When Change is Out of Our Control*, an article by Berkana's Founder, Margaret Wheatley. Available on her website – <http://www.margaretwheatley.com>, and in her new book, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. 2005. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

minimal, but people would come closer to each other, when they met in other contexts, and discovered a *From the Four Directions* connection.

INSERT BOX

Circles for conversation are actually an ancient art form.³ People are brought into a shared space and invited to become quiet, to speak from their heart, and to listen deeply to each other. These days there is such a hunger for authentic conversation that simply opening and hosting the circle space for conversations that matter produces a rush of energy: people feel like they have a place where they can be heard. There are many aspects of circle which, if attended to, will deepen the conversation. In ancient times, people would sit in circle for as long as it took to examine a situation and discern right action. One of the things I notice now is that we are unwilling or unable to take that much time.

For me it has become important to combine circle with other forms in order to move from conversation to harvested reflections and to action. I know that decisions can be made in circle – but it often takes a long time. I often use circle as the “bass rhythm,” the place we always return, while use dialogue in pairs, open space, world café and other forms to move the conversation along. Circle creates an awareness of the whole; sometimes we need to spend time on the parts as well.⁴

Conversations, and leaders, develop greater strength and meaning when connected

We knew that these individual conversations of leaders in *From the Four Directions* would have their greatest power if they were connected. After all, that is how systems in nature change. They change because they are connected with each other. Obviously people are connected when we are in the same room together, but what happens when we move apart? How can the exchange of the face-to-face gathering be used as a foundation for further learning and action?

Because of the importance we place on connection, Berkana has been engaged in numerous experiments about what connections matter, and what the best ways are to foster those connections. I'll mention three of the media we have used.

Sometimes we use **listserves**. A list serve as basically an automated e-mailing list. People can put themselves on the list, and take themselves off. The organization of the list is automated, so minimal administration is required.

³ One of Berkana's favorite references on circle conversation is Christina Baldwin's 1998. *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*. New York: Bantam Books. Christina offers an extensive introduction to the process and worldview of circle.

⁴ For more specific information on circle, and other forms of conversation, visit <http://www.artofhosting.org>

Sometimes a listserve is for announcements only – a “one-to-many” means of communication. Other times, listserves are interactive; they are “many-to-many.” Everyone on the list sends messages to everyone.

List serves are wonderful for immediate connection. They are great for sharing a potpourri of ideas and possibilities. They are a challenging media for doing creative work with those ideas and possibilities. People go off and do their own work separately and then share the results back on the listserve. At Berkana we have shied away from listserves because they frequently lead to overloads, but we realize that the spontaneous communication they facilitate has an important role in maintain an easy sense of connection, camaraderie and exchange.

We have experimented with software that supports **online conversation** on the internet. Simply put, this is a conversation out of time. Participants come to a virtual room on the internet, at a time of their choosing, and converse with others. One person may join in, read what others have written and comment at 3 in the morning in India and two hours later someone responds by joining the conversation in the United States.

Using a simple software called Catalyst, Berkana began to host virtual conversations in 2000. We would use a virtual conversation space as a way to continue discussions that were begun face-to-face. We would ask people to picture themselves as sitting in the same room – in the same circle – with each other when they logged into the virtual space. By organizing the conversation in various threads in Catalyst, various topics could be explored to greater depth than was possible on listserves – and sometimes to greater depth than was possible in face-to-face meetings. The electronic record of the conversation – the words written in the online conference – was available for easy review and some of the conference participants could use this material to help facilitate the online dialogue.

For groups of people who wanted to work together to create something new – an event, a piece of knowledge or a future plan, online conversations was a better tool than e-mail exchanges.

However, the more Berkana worked with simple online conversations, the more we wanted to be able to do something more. We wanted to make it easier for people with similar interests to find each other. We wanted to help people easily share the results of their current and earlier work. We wanted to support them in coming together to do new work together. We wanted, in short, a one-stop virtual location for connection. Gradually we evolved the idea of ***NewWorkSpaces***.

In 2002, Berkana thought we were just looking for a *technology* of connection. But we quickly learned it was much more than technology. We kept coming back to the realization that when people knew what they wanted to do, they would get

it done – regardless of the technology. Berkana began to analyze what was necessary for effective work at a distance. We began to notice things like:

Purpose. When people have a clearly understood purpose for connecting with each other across distance and difference, they will do so. Regardless of the technology, regardless of the difficulty. We will find our way together. Without clear purpose, however, the journey becomes difficult.

Trust. People have to trust each other for anything to happen. It is not just about relationship. People can be in relationship and still not trust each other. It is possible to build trust online among strangers. It is possible, but very difficult to rebuild trust in a group where it has been destroyed. If trust is not present in a group, it must be built, or the group will wither.

Diversity. Diversity at a distance is a challenge, to say the least. It is often hard enough when we are in the same room to respect and learn from the diversity that is present. At a distance, it can just become annoying. What this means is that as we work with people at a distance, if the diversity our work requires is present in the group, we have to be conscious of working with it and drawing it out. It will not take care of itself!

It is no surprise that these aspects are important both when people are in the same room, as well as when they are spread around the globe on different continents. But they are easier to lose track of when we are scattered across distance and unable to see each other's faces.

We began to organize our thinking about what's needed to promote clarity of purpose, instill trust, embrace diversity and do all the other things required for effective work at a distance. And our response was to create a social process and architecture called **NewWorkSpaces**.⁵

By 2004 we had identified and adapted an advanced, interactive, internet-based learning and collaboration software as our virtual **new work spaces**, and began to invite others in. NewWorkSpaces is an online collaboration environment which allows people to:

- Create an online identity, a bio, describing who they are and what they are interested in.
- Find new colleagues.
- Share knowledge in the form of documents, audio clips, book references, powerpoints, video clips and others.
- Find the knowledge that has been offered by others.

⁵ Please visit us on the web at <http://www.newworkspaces.net> to see our social process and architecture.

- Create working groups or learning communities to do new work together
- Engage in online conversation supporting that new work

We're still learning. The novelty of being able to work with people at great distances has worn off. At the same time the pace of life for many of us has continued to increase. Most people don't wake up in the morning and hop out of bed rubbing their hands with excitement because they are going to turn on their computer and connect with others!

Given that at Berkana we are working with people from many communities and organizations who do not share a strong, common boundary, we've learned that it is slow going in terms of building a coherent online community. We're learning to be more patient and to pay attention to what might want to grow in NewWorkSpaces. We've also learned that we need to be doing more of our own work there to attract other energy. It also seems that this type of environment, at least in the early stage we're in, works best for specific, time bounded projects.

We know we need these connections to deepen our work and to share what we are learning with an even broader community. We keep understanding, at deeper levels, that each of these means for connection – listserves, online conversations, NewWorkSpaces – are just another tool. What's critical is how we develop the will and commitment to use them, and anything else we need.

Harvesting and illuminating our work for others

Berkana is working in these spaces between the times we gather in circle or world café or open space. We are doing so because we believe it is critically important to connect these conversations. We are doing so because it is no longer sufficient for us to gather just for ourselves. Each time we come together face to face we are also doing so as proxies for others on the planet who, often unbeknownst to each other, are asking these same questions.

Some of us have been engaged in this work for a time. We have learned some things – and we need to make those learnings more available to others. Not everyone needs to start from zero. So, for example, when I was visiting the Yolitia Healing Center in Mexico in May, it would have been very helpful to have an easily available reference which explains the weekly budgeting meeting being used at Kufunda in Zimbabwe to both build community and take care of daily operations – because Yolitia is facing some of the same issues Kufunda faced.

Sharing local learning globally helps us learn that we are not alone in our work. It also provides specific knowledge, learning and experience generated in different circumstances which can help us think in new ways about what might work in our own contexts.

The main question I feel I am confronting these days is what connections, what conversations, what sharing actually makes a difference? It seems, sometimes in this work we simply yearn for connection to others. That's because this work is breaking us away from our individual constructions of reality and reminding us how much we need to be in community. And in these times, those communities are both local and global. We need both. But what makes a difference? And what simply adds to our overload, and then to our guilt because we can't follow through on commitments?

Berkana knows that we all must learn how to share our work and our learning and our questions and our possibilities with each other. We've got many questions about how to do that well. Berkana has launched what we call the Berkana Exchange, a global network of people who are developing local leadership for self-reliant communities to assist in this process of learning with and from each other. Please come visit us at <http://www.berkanaexchange.net>

BOX

The components of the circle are

- Calling and Hosting
- Welcome Start-point
- Center
- Check-in/Greeting
- Agreements
- Intention
- Guardian of process
- Talking Piece
- Check-out and Farewell

Calling the circle: The role of the host

To start a circle, somebody needs to set an intention (content, mission, or direction), offer basic structure, and be ready to model circle skills while others become accustomed to how a circle works. This person is the caller of the circle, sometimes called the circle host. A circle may be held one time or meet many times over a period of months or years. In ongoing circles, the host role rotates so that responsibility for the group is shared among members.

Welcome or Start-point

Once people have gathered, it is helpful for the host, or any volunteer participant, to begin the circle with a gesture that shifts people's attention from social space to council space. This gesture of welcome may be a moment of silence, reading a poem, singing a song, or listening to a musical interlude--whatever invites a sense of calm presence.

Establishing the center

The center of a circle is like the hub of a wheel: all energies pass through it, and it holds the rim together. To help people remember how the hub helps the group, the center of a circle usually holds objects that represent the intention of the circle. Any symbol that fits this purpose or adds beauty will serve: flowers, a bowl or basket, a candle. Choose something fairly simple that suits the environment, honors local culture, or symbolically represents group intention.

Check-in/Greeting

Check-in helps people into a frame of mind for council and reminds everyone of their commitment to the expressed intention. It insures that people are truly present in mind as well as in body.

To check-in with a new circle, people may say their names and offer a brief self-introduction. To check-in with an ongoing circle, people may speak briefly about their hopes for the meeting, offer other social comment, or share anecdotal stories about their lives.

Setting circle agreements:

The use of agreements creates an interpersonal container that allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility of the well-being and direction of the group. Agreements often used as a basis in PeerSpirit circles include:

- We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality and honor other material, information or decisions with a level of confidentiality appropriate to the setting.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can.

Intention

Intention shapes the circle and determines who will come, how long the circle will meet, and what kinds of outcomes are to be expected. The caller of the circle needs to articulate an intention that will invite people to the first meeting. Intention may evolve as the circle gathers, but it is very helpful to have an idea that will attract the people the circle needs.

Guardian

The single most important tool for aiding self-governance and bringing the circle back to intention is the role of the guardian. To provide a guardian, one circle member at a time volunteers to watch and safeguard group energy and observe the circle's process. The guardian has the group's permission to intercede in group process for the purpose of calling the circle back to center, to focus on the issue or topic, to remind people of respectful practices or agreements, or to suggest a rest break.

The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime, bell, or rattle, that signals everyone to stop action, take a breath, rest in a space of silence. Then the guardian makes this signal again and speaks to why he/she called the pause.

The guardian may suggest use of the talking piece, if the conversation has become hurried, jumbled or unproductive. The guardian may call for time out or a rest break as needed, watch timeliness, and help people see conflict arising and face it creatively. It should be noted that anyone can call for a time-out, or ask for the talking piece, but the guardian should be especially looking for these opportunities.

Talking Piece

The talking piece is a tool derived from Native American traditions. It can be any object that passes easily from hand to hand. This may be an object from Nature, such as a stone, stick or feather, or an object that has meaning for a particular circle. When employed in a round of council, only the person holding the talking piece speaks, and other circle members listen without interruption.

A talking piece is used whenever there is a desire to move the conversation more slowly so everyone's stories, input or wisdom can be gathered. One member picks up the talking piece, shares his/her thoughts, or story and then passes it on. The talking piece progresses around the

circle, either in sequence or by volunteering, until everyone has had an opportunity to contribute. As in check-in, one may pass a turn and then speak after others have spoken.

Checkout and Farewell

At the close of a circle meeting, it is important to allow a few minutes for each person to comment on what they learned, or what stays in their heart and mind as they leave. Closing the circle by checking out provides a formal end to the meeting, a chance for members to reflect on anything that has transpired, and to pick up objects if they have placed something in the center.

Adapted from <http://www.peerspirit.com>