



This month's circle tale is written by Dr. Matthias zur Bensen who sponsored Christina and Ann's recent practicum in Germany. We heard this story from him while there and thought it an inspiring teaching tale.

Circle Tale, July 2007

Resolving a Problem in a Large Organization

Private Tutoring is a billion Euro business in Germany. Students who do not pass from one year to another year have to repeat the current year of schooling, so parents are motivated to find ways to help their children maintain satisfactory grades. Aside from thousands of more or less qualified individual private tutors there are two big companies, which offer their services nationwide. These companies tutor students in groups of three to five.

The story I want to tell takes place in one of these companies, which has around 1000 outlets throughout Germany. The management of the company wanted to intensify the collaboration with its franchisees. In order to achieve this, the company decided the governing board of the franchises needed to meet more often with the management. To make this economically feasible they proposed making the elected board smaller - from 20 to 6 - and reimbursing those six for their increased investment of time. This required new by-laws.

A small group of franchisees sat together with management and created a proposal for the new by-laws. And then the conflict began. Many franchisees didn't like the new by-laws. They feared that their region wouldn't be represented any more in the smaller board. Put to a vote, the new by-laws received only 60% agreement. An emotional, partially aggressive, and hurtful discussion was held between franchisees in their web-based forum that generated more confusion and resistance. For company management it was not an option to simply let majority rule: they did not want to lose the consent of 40% of their franchisees.

And now the circle comes in. Management invited all franchisees to a meeting from Friday noon to Sunday noon. This had never happened before. One hundred forty of them decided to attend. The most important and most critical part of this conference was a whole group dialogue about the conflict around the new by-laws. It started in the middle of the afternoon of the second day. All 140 sat in a circle. In fact, the circle consisted of four concentric circles - like the rings of a tree. In the center of the circle there was pyramid built of sixteen red boxes, which was approximately 90 cm high. The box at the top symbolized the purpose of the company (including the franchising system). The four boxes in the middle level stood for its values. And the nine boxes at the bottom symbolized its goals. The whole group had worked on purpose, values and goals in the preceding parts of the conference and they knew what the boxes meant.

On the box at the top of the pyramid we placed a microphone. This served as our talking piece. We explained the purpose of the talking piece and asked everybody to put the microphone back on the "purpose box" after they had spoken. (We thought that everybody who wanted to speak should be connected with this "purpose box".) Then the dialogue began. Franchisee after franchisee came into the middle of the circle, took the microphone and spoke.

In the beginning, the participants repeated their entrenched positions. They said many known things and hardly anything new. Very slowly this changed. Some of the franchisees, who spoke in the middle time, were able to speak from their heart. This always seemed to change something in the group. The dialogue in the large circle lasted 105 minutes and the energy level was high during this whole time. Then it became obvious that a solution had been found. Due to legal reasons a vote was necessary: 137 out of 140 agreed, there were 3 abstentions and no votes against the solution.

After this circle process the mood in the group was euphoric. They had a pool party in the evening, they danced, jumped in the water with their clothes on, danced again ... The circle had worked.

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.