



In the last several years PeerSpirit has joined an international group of practitioners in the *Art of Hosting Conversations That Matter*. (<http://www.artofhosting.org>) Art of Hosting is a group of people interested in inviting, designing, and holding inspired and meaningful conversations in work, communities, and at home. Art of Hosting uses state-of-the-art social technologies such as World Café, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, and Circle to help people engage in these conversations. Some of these technologies like World Café and Open Space can be used with groups of hundreds of people. Circle is best used in groups under 50, unless divided into separate councils.

The three to four day trainings generally gather people to learn these conversational practices and to help them return to their home and work lives and take leadership in hosting conversations that are important to them. Sometimes Art of Hosting gathers people focusing on a specific issue, such as the upcoming opportunity to work with us and the writers of this story, Teresa and Tenneson, at Gold Lake, CO the end of June.

Teresa Posakony and Tenneson Woolf are group process artists, facilitators, event designers, and hosts of conversation. They have used engagement processes with many clients and communities including health care systems, faith organizations, and family wellness initiatives. They are stewards and practitioners in several networks including The Berkana Institute (www.berkana.org), the Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.org), and the World Café (www.theworldcafe.com).

They share here reflections on an Art of Hosting they facilitated in Illinois March 22-25, 2009 entitled "The Art of Hosting Conversations: Creating Healthy Communities so Children Can Thrive."

Circle Tale, May 2009

The Art of Hosting

Forty-five educational, judicial, and parental leaders from across Illinois gathered in March 2009 to practice Art of Hosting skills to increase their abilities to be conveners of critical conversations for children and families in their state. Buoyed by the Obama buzz in the nation's capitol, in the heart of Obama country, the community gathered with great excitement. Some of those gathered were working on initiatives of balanced and restorative justice; others were focusing on the social fabric of support around children and parents; others were focused on rolling out social and emotional learning standards across the state to bring dialog and circle into all the classrooms.

In Art of Hosting events there are local *callers*—people and organizations that reach out into their networks to invite people they feel will be interested in and benefit from the work. In this particular Art of Hosting the calling team consisted of an impressive array of organizations: Voices for Illinois Children; the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Community Health and Prevention; the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership; the Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice Project; the Circuit Court of Cook County, Juvenile Justice and Child Protection Resource Section; the Chicago Public Schools; the Next Generation of Leaders; and the Wisdom Exchange.

Cheryl, a circle practitioner from the Community Justice for Youth Institute, had a moment of aha about halfway through the training. "I've been so deep in my circle practice that I couldn't really understand the power of world café. I now see how they all (open space, appreciative inquiry, world café, circle) work together to create connection, change and community. I can see the underlying pattern and practices. Wow!"

Cheryl and the rest of the group had tremendous work to get done – building new levels of partnership between the represented groups by networking through meaningful conversations. We opened the first



evening in circle to help the community discover and step into the purpose of the event, “What really brings you here and what is possible now that we are together?”

On our first morning we asked, “What is necessary for you to truly feel safe and bring your full self here?” We gathered around World Café tables. (www.theworldcafe.com) (World Café is a method of weaving insights from small table conversation into the whole.) We set our agreements for how we would be together. Remaining in the World Café format, we explored together the powerful questions that have changed our lives and that could transform the lives of children and families in Illinois.

As a method, Open Space Technology creates an opportunity for participants to name the topics they feel passion and responsibility for and then self-organize into learning and action groups. We used Open Space Technology (www.openspaceworld.org) to focus on making the greatest impact in our communities and places of work. Hosted conversations by participants included:

- How do we build better alliance and partnership with staff in our organizations using these practices?
- How do we truly engage families at the center of our work?
- How do we build family leadership into each of our community programs?
- How could we call a circle in the courtrooms with judges present?
- What’s next in our partnership with schools and family based programs?

We also learned about chaos and order, practices of good dialogue design, the art of harvesting, the art of good questions, and using dialog to take social change to scale.

On the last evening, participants used the free time to meet in circle. It was a deep and sweet council. It was a coming home to the form that anchors so many other engagement practices. Circle (www.peerspirit.com) is the form where many of us have learned to listen more deeply, to share story, to make sense of our complex lives, and to relax into the wisdom that wishes to emerge. It was a night to remember the rhythm of circle – in the quiet and in the listening.

We created healthy community together over these three days: finding self, finding voice, being present, finding each other, journeying with our questions, and making some wise decisions. This Art of Hosting was one of those times when people knew conversation has the capacity to save lives and everyone had a chance to live in that change. We aligned behind the important purpose of helping children and families thrive. We worked to integrate various dialog methods to create social change. It was a powerful time for all present.

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

*For more information on many applications of circle, visit our web site at www.peerspirit.com and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*