



This month's circle tale comes to us from Joan Peters, at the Education & Training institute working with Volkswagen of South Africa. It's a daring and creative use of circle in a real industry situation.

## **Circle Tale 25, October 2001 Using Circle in the Motor Industry**

I am responsible for the Leadership Development unit at a South African Motor Plant. About 6,000 people work at this plant with mainly German top management, white South African middle management and a highly unionized, mainly Black workforce.

Motor manufacturing is a very integrated process: if one part of the Plant has problems, it immediately affects the rest of the Production areas.

I was requested to run a workshop for the management of one key area in the Plant which had been having ongoing problems and was now officially recognized by all who work here as the Company's main bottleneck. They had had problems for some months and the MD was at the end of his patience. He had brought out teams of German specialists to assist, he had brought in a new Unit head from another plant, a Mexican. He had even put his own personal assistant, Nick, a young Engineer, into the area for a few months with the instruction to find out and tell him what was going on there.

On the basis of this information, one manager, Geoff, was moved out of his position into a Technical Services position, a move he perceived as a "slap in the face", Ray, a manager from another area was moved, against his will, into the most difficult area of this Division, and Nick, the MD's assistant, was put into a key position.

By the time this workshop was requested, Ray had already had a number of angry confrontations with the Unit Head and had demanded to be moved back to his old area; Nick was resented by all his colleagues because of his ongoing contact with the MD, especially as the MD seemed to know all sorts of "inside" stories; Geoff was very angry about the way he had been treated; and the Unit Head was very frustrated because he could not understand why there were so many technical problems and when he asked for an explanation, he was always given conflicting reasons. In the eyes of his boss, he looked totally incompetent!

The workshop was scheduled for a Friday night and whole day Saturday. The 6 participants arrived exhausted after a long week and there was definite tension and awkwardness among them.

They seemed surprised at the layout of the conference room, not the traditional U-shaped arrangement, but a circle of chairs with a low table in the middle. The talking piece was introduced, a piece of bamboo, and each person checked in by saying what their hopes were for this workshop. Each person put an object on the table to represent him so we ended up with pens, diaries, mobile phones, etc. forming the center. I explained that the collection of objects represented group wisdom and that if we got stuck we would go into silence and rely on the wisdom within this group to find the solution.

Julie, the Human Resources Consultant for this Division, was appointed as the guardian and her role defined as observer/maintainer of group process.

We started off by asking each person to imagine that he had written a best-selling novel, based on his experiences in the Division. Each person then had the opportunity to say what kind of novel he had written (thriller, adventure, horror?), to describe the theme of the novel and the major characters, what had got them into this situation and what was required to get them out of it.



The atmosphere relaxed noticeably and there was much laughter as they recognized themselves. From that we identified the major issues that needed to be addressed.

Each person then had the opportunity to describe what was causing him the most discomfort and stress -- how he had reacted to this and how he thought his reactions had affected himself and others in the team.

By this time, the atmosphere was quiet and reflective. The group policed themselves on the use of the talking piece. After each person had spoken, there was a time for feedback from the rest of the group. Nick's role in the group was spoken about at length. It had never occurred to Nick that his colleagues would view his relationship with the MD as threatening. Al, the Maintenance manager, said to him: "Look Nick, you are new to this area; you form impressions, you share this with the MD without checking with us that you have the correct understanding. This forms his impressions of us, which makes us all nervous. Look what has happened to Geoff." Nick accepted the feedback and agreed how he would deal with the MD's requests for information.

The Unit Head spoke about his frustrations: firstly being a Mexican and trying to understand German and South African ways of doing business; and secondly not having correct information on the reasons for production losses, and how each person tried to make sure his area was not held responsible for losses by putting the blame onto their colleagues. The group acknowledged that this was happening and spoke openly about the culture of fear and covering up your mistakes that had developed.

Each person ended off by stating what he thought his major personal challenge was now: Ray spoke about not letting negativity seep into his day-to-day activities; Al spoke about being more open with the group about problems he was having; and Geoff was helped to see that his production experience made him able to deliver a unique service from his new department.

The listening was respectful and once the issues had been acknowledged, the search for solutions began. The group's meeting schedule was revised and Nick and Al agreed to work on a way of accurately recording production performance and reasons for losses.

The whole energy had changed: people were now talking about how to make it work. Ray made the point that if the Unit was to perform each one of them needed to be a success, because a problem in one area affected everybody else. So if one of the group was having a problem, he should be able to turn to the group for assistance and that each one of them needed to help each other be a success.

With two clear solutions recorded, the group listed a set of agreements that would govern them from Monday.

Then it was time for a personal summary of the time they had spent together. All the personal animosities had been put aside and there was commitment to making it work.

The circle I believe was instrumental in the openness that occurred and the ultimate coming together of the group. The use of the talking piece definitely slowed down the pace and improved the listening and quality of information shared.

And, on Monday, the group started implementing their agreements so the commitment to change is there!

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