Creating Your Own Peer Learning Community

Susan E. Parker, Ph.D., Deputy University Librarian, UCLA Library
Martha Hruska, Associate University Librarian for Collection Development,
UC San Diego Library
Nancy Angelo, Ph.D., Principal, Angelo + Garnets Consulting
Linda Garnets, Ph.D., Principal, Angelo + Garnets Consulting

Abstract

The workshop leaders offered a model of community building and self-management to help participants realize effective contributions to change in their own organizations. This positive approach gives individuals tools that enable them to influence outcomes together. In an intentionally built community of effectiveness, this helps to forge bold collaboration by focusing on common issues, stimulating creative thinking, and sidestepping the feeling of loss that can come from other kinds of change.

Two librarians and two organizational consultants described their own self-generated learning community. The World Café concept was introduced and through facilitated interaction, participants generated an inventory of core critical issues and engaged in a dynamic process in which they built communities of interest.

World Café uses integrated design principles to manage conversations with deeper meaning. It is designed to give groups traction to move forward with discussions of critical issues. It stimulates creative thinking and provides a journey in which the process is shared, respecting and making room for each person's opinions and insight. Engaging in this process helped participants to experience the powerful phenomenon the workshop leaders had created together: finding and building a peer group for support and learning, and using it to help break through old models of problem solving to achieve greater value for library users.

Learning Outcomes: 4-Hour Pre-Conference Workshop

The workshop offered the following goals:

1. Learn how the librarians experienced building an intentional peer community.
2. Connect with the facilitators and two participants in that community.
3. Learn the World Café method and practice intentional processing.
4. Directly experience forming one's own community of interest.
5. Leave this workshop with a process that participants can use to start a community of collaboration.

Origins and Purpose

Originally focused on building library leadership succession planning from within the University of California, UCLA Deputy University Librarian Parker developed this project in collaboration with Angelo and Garnets, whose expertise is leading and managing change in academic libraries. Parker identified and invited eight Associate University Librarians (AULs) within the UC who were relatively new to their roles to participate. Committed to working and meeting together formally for a minimum of one year, members concentrated on evaluating their strengths and developing themselves professionally. This workshop described highlights from the first year of their work together in building a peer support group of experienced AULs who are successful in self-management and leading others through change.

Background and Context

Librarians working in colleges and universities are navigating challenges that are difficult for any organization. At the University of California libraries, the economic downturn has led to severe budget cuts and mandatory staff furloughs. All libraries have experienced budget difficulties as well as major changes in technologies and our field of library science.

The objective of the group of AULs was to help themselves and each other to lead change strategically. In addition, personal and professional development and renewal were goals. All were interested in helping to strengthen the UC libraries through generating new ideas and approaches collaboratively, and thus contributing to the economic sustainability and viability of the University itself.

The organized effort occurred during 2010 and early 2011. Parker assumed the role of organizer and convenor. Angelo and Garnets designed, led, and offered pro bono consultation during that time and helped the group to discuss and create objectives that led to meaningful group outcomes.

Three off-site retreats were custom designed to meet the librarians' needs and interests.

Session 1

The group used session one to get to know each other better through group exercises. They discussed present challenges and possible future strategies. They explored the creation of a shared agenda for leadership and collaboration, and agreed to work on this over the following year.

Session 2

The purpose of this meeting was to deepen understanding of their strengths as leaders. The results of the Strengths Finder tool were analyzed (Rather & Conchie, 2008); individuals shared their results and implications of the results for group work were discussed. In particular, this was an exploration of influencing skills, and how to apply what was learned to one's individual library as well as to the UC system of libraries.

Session 3

"Getting Your Skin in the Game." This session enabled the AULs to advance their own priorities and those of their own libraries. Group members came prepared to discuss "What game are you playing, and how ready are you to play?" This required them to identify a challenge each wanted to address. This session was designed to help develop their skills and capacity to enact change, explore tactical approaches for implementing the change, and support each other in resolving issues.

Sharing Outcomes

The AULs continue to meet in person and via conference calls, at two to three month intervals. The two librarians leading this workshop discussed their experiences. Parker has used the group to share knowledge, create a trusted peer network, and leverage mutual strengths for problem solving, co-mentoring, and support. Hruska described her motivation to reconnect. New to the UC libraries, she gained closer colleagues and benefited from their new perspective. She also found the retreats were useful time away to reflect. Finally, she appreciates resources and knowledge gained.

Hands-On Activities: The World Café

As stated above, The World Café method uses integrated design principles for managing conversations with deeper meaning (World Café, n.d.). It is designed to give groups traction and enable them to move forward with discussions of critical issues. It stimulates creative thinking and engages all participants. World Café assumes that the knowledge and wisdom we need is present and accessible within the group at hand.

Collective insight evolves from honoring unique individual contributions, connecting ideas, "listening into the middle," and noticing deeper themes and questions. Intelligence emerges as the system connects to itself in diverse and creative ways.

Angelo and Garnets introduced and explained the World Café concept. Participants used it to engage in a dynamic process in which they built communities of interest. This was the central experience of the workshop. Workshop participants first generated an inventory of core critical issues and problems through facilitated interaction. Using the World Café concept, workshop leaders engaged participants in active learning exercises.

Design, Assumptions, and Procedure

Angelo and Garnets explained the process. Participants were to focus on what matters, contribute their thinking, speak their minds and hearts, and listen actively for understanding. In addition, they were urged to link and connect ideas, doodle and draw, and—above all—to have fun.

Participants were asked to move to a table where they knew few people, with a limit of 5 per table. Tables had been covered before the workshop began with white poster paper and markers for doodling and other non-verbal creativity, and a variety of snacks for sharing.

Each table had a volunteer to be the Anchor, stay at the same table for all rounds, and report out the table's ideas at the end of the café session. All others moved to a different table for each round, lasting ten minutes. Angelo and Garnets kept time and announced the end of each round.

Rounds 1, 2, and 3

In Round 1 and Round 2, participants were asked to bring forward their most compelling issues and problems. In Round 3, they were asked to imagine sitting at the table a year from now with other participants and to complete the following statements:

I'm so glad we were able to… (do what with your conundrum)

 We tried these new approaches.. and learned…

We engaged our users and stakeholders in these ways.. and realized these results…

We used these obstructions to our advantage.. By doing…

We secured campus support by…

Our faculty, students, and staff joined by…

Integration Round

Participants chose to modify the form of the workshop as it had been advertised, and agreed to spend the final 30 minutes to practice again. The workshop was being recorded on video, but with the conference organizers' agreement, we turned off the cameras, formed a single group and processed questions together about how each person experienced the workshop, and how each one was feeling at the end. The responses were timed, with a watch passing to each participant.

Angelo and Garnets followed up as promised during the next week by sending a compiled list of participants' names and e-mail addresses to facilitate their ability to keep their new peer community going.

Conclusion

Sharing their experiences in forming and conducting a peer network among librarians at the University of California, the workshop leaders engaged participants in an experiential exercise to create their own nascent community of interest. Using the World Café, participants generated ideas and demonstrated the transformative effectiveness of a collaboration process that embraces learning and validates out-of-the-box thinking. The participation of consultants distinguishes this from other leadership programs, but peers can create a meaningful group without professional assistance.

References

Rather, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Great Teams, and Why People Follow.* New York: Gallup Press.

World Café Community Foundation. (n.d.). *The World Café method.* Retrieved April 5, 2012 from http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html.