

# **Making Our Workplaces More Purpose-Filled Through Leadership Circles**

**By: Marv Franz, MBA**

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## **The Common Workplace Reality**

*The team sits down in their predictable spots around the table in a windowless meeting room, flanked on either side by their coffees and buzzing smartphones that serve to divert scarce attention to other urgent matters. Most haven't seen much of each other since the last meeting. Documents and laptops occupy the remaining table space. Phrases like "the new reality," "right-sizing" and "critical few" are tossed around as code words to indicate significance and seriousness. Halfway through the stacked agenda, body language tells the story about where the fears and tensions lie, as well as where the battle lines will fall regarding key decisions. Discussion is terse, conversation is disjointed, implications are not considered and each player rehearses a familiar script that everyone else could predict from meetings past. Turf gets vigorously protected, expectations get managed and at the end of the day, everyone hopes they find themselves on the right side of where the buck stops.*

Professionals assemble like this day in and day out, keeping our businesses and institutions moving ahead. The reality is that most of these are decent people. They are parents who help with homework, spouses who encourage each others' dreams, children who care for ailing parents, friends who travel together and share hobbies, neighbours who help one another out and volunteers who coach sports teams. They all behave in such different ways outside of their work environments. They, in fact, have ambitions and dreams of their own and for others. But so often they feel trapped in a world of work where the battle for power and control is relentless. We are, in fact, these people.

As noted organizational theorist, Margaret Wheatley, observes, "After so many years of defending ourselves against life and searching for better controls, we sit exhausted in the unyielding structures of organizations we've created, wondering what happened. What happened to effectiveness, to creativity and meaning? What happened to us?" When our organizational systems and structures manage us, we find ourselves struggling to lead effectively at every level in the organization. In turn, our teams don't perform as well as they could, and employee engagement and service delivery suffers.

## **Longing for Purposeful Work**

Along with this experience of our everyday workplace, there is a growing awareness of how our world continues to change around us at a rapid pace. Voices like Jeffrey Sachs and Thomas Friedman, among others chronicle global power shifts, the financial, humanitarian and ecological crises we find ourselves in, along with the impact of staggering technology advancements. However, we also recognize how our world needs institutions and organizations of all kinds, including business, to serve a leading role in making the world a better place both globally and locally. It is up to all of us to be on the solution side of the equation. We now talk about corporate social responsibility in business and we are seeing the rise of social enterprise. The *Occupy* movement may well be an indication that this expectation of making meaningful contributions to our world will continue to grow.

Given our disappointing experiences in the workplace and our hope that there must be a better way, questions are being raised about the purpose of our institutions, organizations and business enterprises: Why do we exist, anyway? Are we still relevant? What, *really*, are we here for? What difference do we



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make in this world? Do we really believe in our vision and mission, or are these statements simply a veneer for the profit motive or a cover for self-preservation? In addition, a millennial generation judiciously asks, “Where is an organization that I can really believe in to make my contribution?”

Simon Sinek in his book, *Start with Why*, explains that employees and clients alike are looking for the compelling reasons for why their organizations do what they do. As he puts it, “People don’t buy what you do, they buy *why* you do it.” He says that we all long to be inspired by a truly meaningful purpose and be part of something that allows us to share the same dreams, values and hopes that we have. The truth is that many of our organizations struggle to articulate the compelling *why* of our organization in ways that truly inspire purpose, meaning and hope. And yet we long for this ourselves. Simply put, we want to be part of something significant.

If this is true, then leaders need to bring the discussion of *why* to the forefront in order to renew the fundamental purpose of their organization, and then find ways together with their employees to live this out in everyday world of the workplace. Dan Pink in his book *Drive* says that research surprisingly indicates that what motivates professionals at work is much more than financial compensation. Rather, he says, we are motivated by experiencing autonomy in our work, by being able to master skills we enjoy and contributing to something meaningful to the world. We are looking for ways to have meaning at work. And we are looking for a work environment that allows us to be truly human as we live out that meaning. How can we find our way?

## The Triangle and the Circle

To make sense of our disheartening experiences in the workplace together with our hope for what it could be possible, it may be useful to think about an organization or enterprise comprised of two shapes: a triangle and a circle.

*The triangle represents the mind and function of the organization.* Its pointed shape symbolizes its hierarchy with power being centralized at the top where one leader is ultimately responsible for the decisions of the organization. The broadening sides of the triangle represent the chain of command throughout the organization to enable the work functions of the organization to most efficiently produce, sell and deliver a service or product. The triangle emphasizes the effective management of resources and systems and is guided by policy to accomplish very tangible tasks and objectives. The triangle asks, “*What must we do?*” and “*How must we do it?*” It ensures that everything can be measured as quantifiable, objective data in order to understand assess performance and achieve results. The triangle clarifies roles, gives titles, grants authorities and assigns dollar valuations on these various functions within the organization. Fundamentally, the triangle is what gives the organization its shape and what makes its engines run.

*The circle, on the other hand, represents the heart and purpose of the organization.* Its rounded shape symbolizes that the organization is a community of people that all have something important to contribute apart from their status in the hierarchy. The circle emphasizes the interdependence of its people and that employees have an identity they bring to work each day that is much more multi-dimensional than their organizational role within the workplace. The circle is aspirational in nature and emphasizes leadership and development of people rather than the management of systems. The circle asks, “*Why are we doing this?*” It is the heart of the organization that provides vision, inspiration, empathy, courage and creativity. The circle helps the organization understand its own meaning and significance, its history, purpose and values. The circle enables the organization to live with ambiguity, move through conflict,



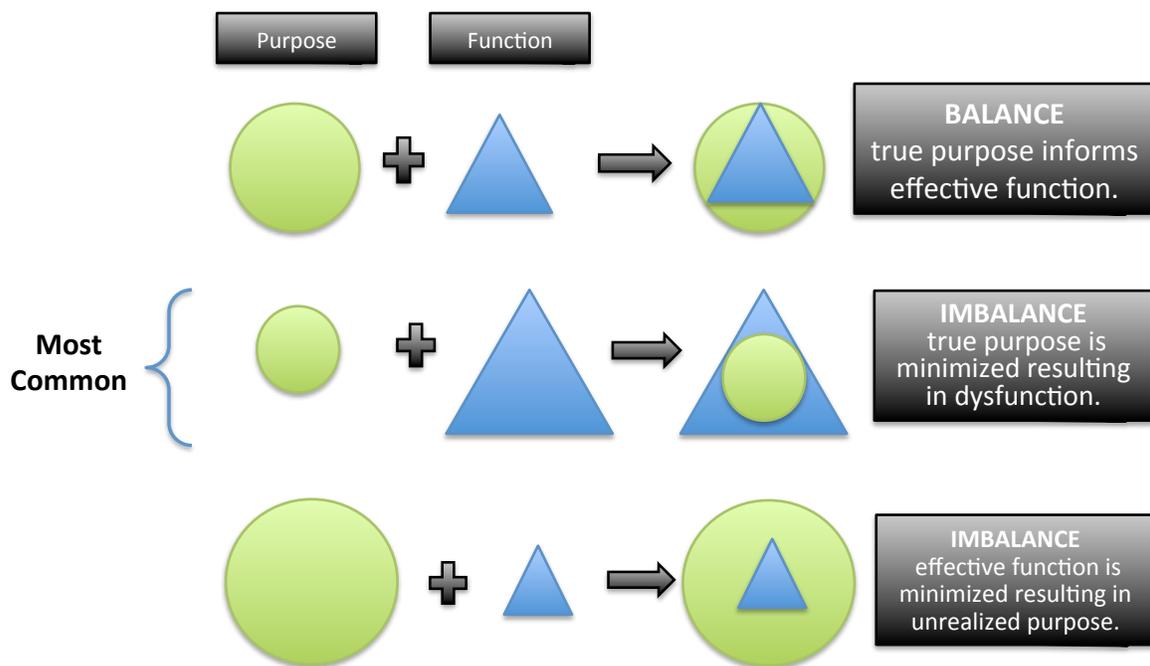
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cultivate reflection, promote story-telling, foster relationship development, and leads to collaboration. Fundamentally, the circle articulates vision and purpose and then inspires its people to action.

*All organizations need both the triangle and the circle to work in balanced partnership.* When this happens true organizational purpose informs effective organization function.

If one shape dominates, the vital functions of the other are minimized to the detriment of the health of the organization. If the triangle dominates and squeezes out the circle, true purpose is minimized resulting in organizational dysfunction. In other words, the triangle becomes the purpose. If the circle is disproportionate in size to the triangle, effective function is minimized resulting in unrealized purpose. Or in other words, good intentions are never actualized. (See Figure 1 below)

Figure 1. *The Relationship Between the Circle and Triangle.*



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## A Triangle Dominated World

However, given the reality of the world we live in, the most common challenge is that the triangle tends to dominate and squeeze out the role of the circle. Organizations with minimized function don't last long. Indeed, in much of our institutional life true purpose is minimized resulting in organizational dysfunction. This is not an unexpected result as we consider the pressures placed upon organizations, including:

- *An increasingly competitive marketplace* and scarce funding sources that pressure organizations to do more with less;
- *Increasing regulation and compliance* that pressure organizations to add more layers of bureaucracy;
- *Increasing public and stakeholder scrutiny* that pressure organizations to expend more energy on managing stakeholder expectations, monitoring its own actions and carefully crafting its messages – much of which is form over substance.

The net effect is that overloaded managers end up prioritizing what is urgent to stay afloat and focus on achieving short-term results. *We lose our way and end up in the service of the systems, structures and numbers rather than using them in service of a larger purpose and vision.* When purpose gets lost, agendas become selfish and people get trampled over. The result is that we end up in meetings like the one described at the beginning of this article. However, there are ways to restore this balance and that can lead to long-term, sustainable organizational health.

## Expanding The Circle To Fit the Triangle

The reality is that in order for organizations to be successful over the long term, they need to be places for people to flourish as they do the work of the organization. We need to develop our workplaces as communities that equip, empower and inspire employees to live out the purposes of the organization within the realities of the triangle. *We need the circle to expand so that it can re-balance with the triangle.*

One effective way to do this is by creating an environment for people to grow and develop called 'Leadership Circles':

*Leadership Circles are carefully designed groups of no more than ten people within an organization that periodically come together within a 'safe' environment to learn about leadership, reflect upon and discuss their experiences in the workplace, listen to others as well as give and receive constructive feedback.*

In a sense, they are incubators for learning that are very intentionally designed to reflect on the impact of the triangle and equip people to expand the circle of the organization. There are several important characteristics of Leadership Circles:

- **A Safe Environment to Learn and Grow:** Leadership Circles are led by a facilitator or pair of facilitators, who provide the necessary leadership to create a safe environment for the its participants to be real and transparent about their work experience. They help the group establish trust by setting the tone and developing a 'rules of engagement' to safe-guard the trust. They provide focus and structure for the Leadership Circles gatherings (not called 'meetings') and facilitate discussion among group participants. What is even more important is that they model authenticity by being real and transparent about their own experiences. If the facilitators take the risk of being vulnerable among



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the group, others will see that it can be a safe place for themselves to be real as well. They are not expected to be experts in leadership or to be trainers, nor are they expected to be senior leaders in the organization. Each facilitator is carefully selected and then is equipped for the role, with the requirement of having prior experience in a Leadership Circle. *We are convinced that true personal growth can't come without vulnerability and risk, and this must be demonstrated first in order for others to follow.*

- **A Place to Belong in the Workplace:** These groups can be composed of employees from within a work department, gathered from across functions, and also be a cross-section of the management hierarchy of the organization. It is important to have staff mixed together in ways that enable them to speak freely about their work experience (ie. no direct reporting relationships in the same group). Employees are invited to participate voluntarily and no one is required to join a group. In fact, participants join an LC as a member of the organizational community where, in this setting, all are welcomed as equals. Participants are asked to make their job identity secondary to their personal identity so that any possible power dynamics are minimized. We believe that each person in an organization has more contribute than any defined functional role will expect of them: for example, administration assistants can possess great creativity and senior managers can exercise tremendous compassion. This setting is intended to be an alternative culture to the every-day work setting so that participants can learn to be different people when they return. *When people feel they belong in an organization, they behave in ways that demonstrate personal ownership of the mission they serve.*
- **A Leadership That Inspires Hope:** Leadership Circles have a very particular understanding of leadership that is important to understand. Leadership in this context is defined as *leadership through influence (relational) versus leadership through power (positional)*, and aligns with what is classically understood as 'servant leadership', first popularized by Robert Greenleaf. In other words, leadership gets democratized and becomes something that everyone can participate in. Circle participants are challenged to consider how they can use their influence and expertise to bring positive change to the organization, even if they do not have a formal leadership or management role. It is an expression of leadership that invites employees to lead courageously and authentically from the heart and call out the best out of one another in service of the purpose for the organization. *When a person discovers that he or she can use their influence to affect positive change to their organization, they see a whole new dimension of purpose in their work.*
- **A Forum That Truly Engages Reality:** One the biggest benefits of creating a safe space is that participants are able to express, explore and respond to their areas of insecurity, fears, mistakes and missteps, without reprisal. Common elements of gatherings include silence to think and reflect, a time to check-in with each other (*"How are you doing, really?"*), discussion about an article or video on various leadership topics, as well as candid and transparent discussion about how themes that are raised may apply to each individual. This is not another training exercise with information about leadership or management left unapplied, nor is it an ungrounded feel-good exercise. Our observation is that employees in organizations are already saturated with information and training and, in addition, have no patience for superficial group-building exercises. Rather, they hunger for a protected space where they can consolidate learning from the gritty context of their everyday work lives, and those of others around them. *A circle experience is like a great conversation that leaves participants more aware of themselves, their impact on others, more energized and better prepared to face the challenges in their day-to-day work.*

Typically, these Leadership Circles meet once every three to five weeks for approximately two hours and have a life cycle from one to two years. Over the course of that time we have seen incredible



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transformation happen in the lives of participants and on the organizations they serve. Some of the impacts include the following:

- **More Authentic Leadership:** Participants have been far more open than anticipated and are making changes to the way they manage their teams and projects. Managers are more likely to admit mistakes and be transparent with their team. In addition, some have been emboldened to face conflict on their teams by having open, honest discussions and being firm when necessary without using power coercively. As they have done this, they more often helped to positively transform a situation, rather than to simply contain it.
- **More Effective Talent Management:** Managers have been learning how to identify and better utilize the talent on their teams because of the engagement skills they have improved. Some have recognized new abilities in their staff and retained them because they provided them with new opportunities to grow and challenge themselves.
- **Spontaneous Innovation and Quality Improvement:** Participants have gone back to their teams to identify ways to innovate service delivery and management systems, unprompted. Our experience has been that the safe space created has enabled staff to imagine new ways of approaching old problems. When one person discovers, “*Oh, I’m not the only one with this problem*” it is amazing how shared ideas and experiences shape new approaches.
- **Deeper Engagement and Improved Morale:** We are seeing that participants are re-entering their work with deeper engagement and increased motivation because they can see how their role is linked with the impact on external and internal clients and the overall purpose of the organization. It is because they have been empowered and called into a higher responsibility for bringing about positive change in the organization that participants share greater ownership of the mission and vision.

## Critical Success Factors

There are several critical success factors for an initiative like this to be truly transformational:

- **Senior Leaders Must Support the Expansion of the Circle:** Without the support and sponsorship of key senior stakeholders in the organization, an initiative like this will not succeed because it will be perceived as a threat to power rather than a way to empower the organization. However, within an organization, the sponsor need not be the Senior Executive, but in order to expand the circle it must have their blessing. In fact, it may well be that a Senior VP is better positioned to move forward with an initiative like this within their sphere of responsibility, in order to become a catalyst of change within the organization.
- **The Circle Initiative Must Be a Customized Design:** Your expression of the Circle needs to respond to your particular organizational context. Employees are justifiably skeptical of the next ‘new thing’. Therefore, meaningful growth and development initiatives must be customized to the organization in order to be credible. In the Leadership Circle example, the design and structure was developed by enlisting key change agents across the organization who then led by initiating and facilitating new groups. In addition, the Leadership Circle initiative as described may not be what is best suited to your setting. Perhaps for your context, instead of a leadership focus, an organization may wish to make the brand of the organization, product/service excellence or client engagement as the focus of learning. There are other creative possibilities to apply these



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principles to project teams and high-potential leadership programs as well. Formats and group composition also need to be adapted to work schedules and as well as the locations of where participants work.

- ***The Circle Initiative Must Be Voluntary:*** In order to create an environment of trust, participants need to actively choose to participate. Our experience has been that when the first group of participants has a positive experience, it creates a buzz that generates its own momentum. Where Leadership Circles have been set up there are now waiting lists.

## **How Circles May Help Your Organization**

If you want to expand the circle to re-balance the triangle in your organization ask yourself these questions:

- In what ways does the circle need to grow larger in my organization and in what ways might the triangle make us dysfunctional?
- Could I envision an initiative like this transforming my organization?
- What would be the benefits I might hope for personally and as a senior leader?
- What might be unique about our organization context that would need to be factored into a possible design?
- Am I truly prepared to support an initiative like this and lead by example?
- Do I have a few other key influencers who would come with me in this journey?

If the answers to these questions point in the same direction, it may be time to take courage and take action. And if you do, it may be quite possible that over time, your organization can be one that makes a significant transformative impact on your people and on the world around us.

