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The Sewing Circle Model for Community Collaboration: A Multicultural Approach

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Sewing Circle Model® for Community Collaboration: A Multicultural Consensus Approach

By Jamie Branam Kridler Ph.D.,
Camille Carter, and Sandra Nuttall

“For nineteenth century women, quilts were the podium, the pulpit and the judges’ gavel which their society denied them. Their quilts speak the language of abolition, patriotism, politics, social justice and westward expansion.”

Pat Ferrero, Filmmaker, Professor Emerita San Francisco State University

Introduction

The Cocke County Collaborative (a division of Community House Cooperative, Inc.) of Newport and Cocke County in East Tennessee developed a new model for collaboration. The model has drawn a host of interested people and organizations from across the country both in following the progress of the working model and partnering for community based projects. We began with the idea that members of a collaborative group would enter the collaboration as individual people, without designated role or title, and would then be able to turn towards any group with which he or she were affiliated and seek support or involvement for a particular purpose.

For example, one member may engage her family in one undertaking and her employer and her church in another. As we naturally relate and function in this way, we say things like: “OK, I’m wearing my Executive Director’s hat now” or “Speaking as a mother...” or maybe “Our neighborhood association wanted to help too.” In Newport we are just beginning to document how this ancient “new” model works best, based on our experiences and recollections. Because of our history and our traditions, we call this method the Sewing Circle Model for Community Collaboration.

The Model

“Sympathy is a supporting atmosphere, and in it we unfold easily and well.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

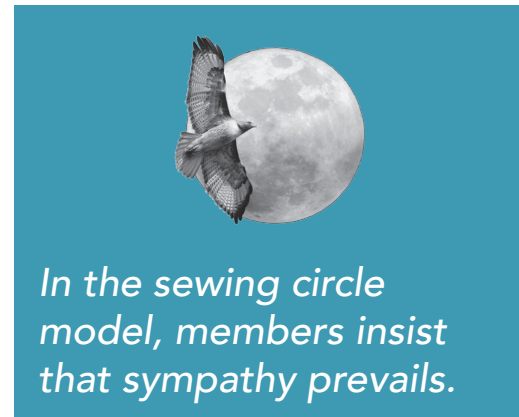
When first required to construct an organizational chart depicting the grassroots collaboration method practiced in Newport and Cocke County, East Tennessee, our group’s original attempt produced a hodge-podge that fit no current /prior standards or models but then when the various roles were charted on paper, a quilt-like pattern evolved. We had come together first at a kitchen table and then in an old school building managed

by a Senior Citizens organization, where the quilting tradition was alive and thriving. Our collective decision-making and productivity were born of decades sitting together at tables and standing together at gravesides, and the patchwork quilt symbolized the unity, diversity and equity of the collaborative.

Quilting, sewing, patching, knitting and stitchery are the primeval feminine arts, taught by the women and institutionalized through giving, sharing and preserving cloth and fiber for the health and sustenance of civilization. As the mythic sewing circle meets and creates and perpetuates itself, there are no victors, nor losers, nor victims, nor bosses.

As women have emerged from the confines of domesticity into the workplace, the street, and the corporate board-room, they have tended to accept and adopt for themselves the language, methods, ways of operating, and even the dress, of the male-dominated culture.

In the sewing circle model, members insist that *sympathy* prevails. The most fundamental criterion for decision-making will be born of that "like passion": that children will thrive, or that peace will prevail, or that resources will be equitably shared – and that profit and control and measuring to any absolute material standards become subsidiary considerations.



The sewing circle model for collaboration eliminates the need for the contrivances of representation and allows each individual to represent herself and her uniqueness first, and then to develop naturally the linkages she brings. In this way, principle takes precedence over personality, temperament, race, sexual orientation, age, etc.

The sewing circle model is beyond consensus. Its shared values and common purpose, its attachment to place and history of natural relationships position it for powerful action unfettered by cumbersome clarifications and contractual agreement-making. Progress is driven by a tradition of understanding and commonality: **core values**.

These sympathetic collaborators take time for *reflection* as well – time for remembering and "shining light again." There is time for silence needed in order to turn away from the demands of daily living and to consider deeply the events and questions of life's unfolding.

Membership

Personal belonging in this circle is embraced regardless and independent of employment, class, race, age, other affiliation, etc. but it is strengthened through multiplicity of relationships. (A member's granddaughter is employed by another member's family

or a member's nephew is a bench-warmer on the little league team coached by another member's brother...) Matters of everyday life find their proper place as trivial, moderately important or related to central core values – thus not allowing inconsequential matters to eclipse the primary work. Affiliations – personal, family, community, region, state, nation, world – are recognized in ring patterns emanating from the center like a target. Although the sewing circle model is based on the female principles of equitable process, it does not have to do with gender, and men can easily feel comfortable, effective and natural engaging in this model of collaboration.

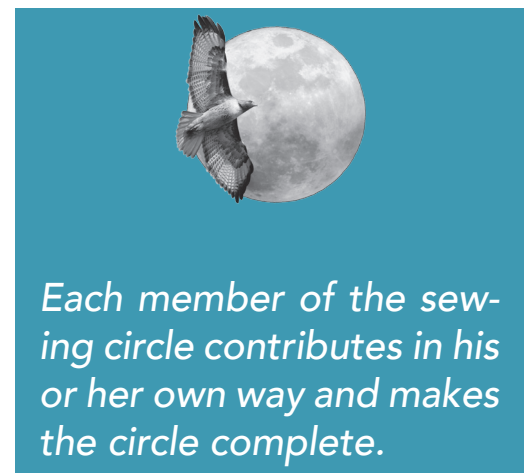
The sewing circle model for community collaboration holds in high regard the exercise of personal belief or practice, and for experiential learning and, therefore, the elderly, the traveled, the bold, the patient. Different ways of knowing are accepted and celebrated allowing for the youth and the elder, the graduate and the self-taught, the urban and the rural, the male and the female to sit in mutual respect and equity.

Members of the sewing circle bring unique talents and skills to the circle. One member may have the ability to see a beautiful, complete design in the mind's eye. This member often designs and pieces the quilt-top. The quilt-top provides a pattern for the members of the circle to follow as they work to complete the quilt. The designer equates to a visionary in a community collaboration. This person clearly sees the future and how the community is likely to benefit.

Some members of the sewing circle may never design or piece a quilt-top or sew a stitch on the quilt, but they have other skills. The quilt-top, batting, and backing must be aligned and pinned together in order for the quilting to begin. Some members of the community collaborative are willing to provide only one or two services to the group. Some members stay, some depart, and some return again in the future.

The "Way" of the Quilt

Quilters come in all shapes, sizes, ages, genders, and abilities. They complete the day-to-day quilting. Some are quick and accurate; others are quick and less than accurate. Some are most deliberate and approach the work as an art form; some work slowly and see the task as something that simply must get done. Some of the quilters are also designers and makers of the quilt-top. There are a few members that have the ability and willingness to be a part of the entire process. Each member of the sewing circle contributes in his or her own way and makes the circle complete. Community collaboratives also have individuals that fulfill specific roles, individuals that vary in their talent, skills and willingness to contribute, and individuals that have the skill, time, and motivation to participate in the entire process.



Each member of the sewing circle contributes in his or her own way and makes the circle complete.

The quilting frame provides the structure for the aligned quilt-top, batting, and backing and allows the sewing circle to view the entire quilt as they work. The frame hangs overhead from the ceiling and provides the outline of the quilt. The Core Values of the community collaborative can be compared to the quilting frame. Everyone agrees and works within the framework of the Core Values. Issues are resolved and trust maintained as the work continues within the value system.

Eventually the sewing circle finishes the quilting, removes the quilt from the frame, and sews a border around the edges of the quilt. The quilt maintains the shape and is ready for use. Once complete or near completion, the process begins again. The community collaborative removes their work from the "frame" when the work is able to "stand on its own" in the community. The next undertaking begins with the collaborative members using the knowledge and skills they attained or refined with the last project. Like the sewing circle, community collaborative work is rewarding, affirming, and beneficial. The desire to continue is fostered.

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