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Chapter 20- Facilitating Leadership Learning Using Co-Mentoring Circles

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FACILITATING LEADERSHIP LEARNING USING CO-MENTORING CIRCLES

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Abstract

Time for mentoring aspiring school leaders moving from their roles as veteran teachers, instructional coaches, or deans of students to their new role as K–12 principal certification interns is in short supply in today's complex schools. Over the past 7 years, 76 interns have participated in co-mentoring circles. Co-mentoring circles offer educators a safe, supportive community in which to learn with others who are uniquely situated to understand the challenges present in today's K–12 schools. Co-mentoring circles can provide a ready group of co-mentors one can call on without waiting for a specific mentor to be available. These circles are usually comprised of fewer than 12 participants. The focus is to create trusting and supportive developmental relationships among co-mentoring circle members. The initial processes in the circle's formation and development are highlighted in this chapter: using group agreements; holding confidentiality; developing trust; self-assessment of one's communication styles and skills; giving and receiving feedback; reflection and reflective practice; activities called "hopes and concerns," "professional timeline," and "the self-portrait;" and assessment of the circle's work. Once group agreements, confidentiality, and effective communication are established, trust can begin to grow among the members. Co-mentoring circle participants are overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the mentorship provided in co-mentoring circles.

Mentoring Context and Program Development

The co-mentoring circle was developed for aspiring K–12 school leaders seeking to become K–12 school principals or school district leaders.

Need for This Program

Principal interns have unique needs in their internship, with a number of tensions built into their relationship with their school district-assigned principal internship mentor (PIM). The PIM is usually the intern's principal in the intern's other role in the school as teacher, instructional coach, dean of students, or school counselor.

One tension interns expressed is they do not want their PIM to view them as not knowing how to do something they have been assigned, needing additional support for completing an internship task, or looking ill-prepared for leadership. Another tension interns described is when they disagree with how their PIM wants a particular action handled. Even when the outcome of the assigned internship task seemed successful, if the task was performed differently than how the PIM wanted, the PIM might call their performance into question. Interns have also expressed that the PIM's evaluation of their internship performance may have affected the way their PIM, who is also their principal, viewed their work in their other role in the school as a teacher, instructional coach, dean of students, or school counselor.

Yet another tension held throughout the internship is that the PIM also serves as a gatekeeper to an intern's future employment as an administrator, as the PIM is a key recommendation writer and reference. An intern's ability to work collaboratively and collegially with their PIM can be key to future employment. Tension can also come from the quality of feedback interns receive. Often PIMs assign interns tasks so the PIM can move on to another task. If the PIM is not present to personally observe how the intern completes the task, feedback from others may be used to evaluate the intern's work. Interns say it would be helpful if their PIM could personally observe their work as interns and provide timely feedback.

Purpose and Objectives of the Program

As the university-based mentor, I wanted to create a safe space to address these tensions, so I created the co-mentoring circle process and have been refining the process over the past 7 years. The co-mentoring circle provides a space where interns can receive feedback and support for their unique work as interns from other interns.

Organizational Setting and Population Served

Circle participants are university graduate students/interns completing a K–12 Principal Certification Program while already serving in roles such as teachers, instructional coaches, or deans of students. Co-mentoring circles are developed within the Principal Certification Internship Seminar course, held once a month on Saturdays. Ninety minutes of each required five-hour seminar is used for

co-mentoring circle activities. It takes several circle sessions, with participants working through the 10 components, to form a functioning co-mentoring circle. Once the circle is formed, the 90 minutes of circle time are devoted to an agenda of interns' suggested topics.

Organization Support and Infrastructure

As a required component of their certification program, interns attend the internship seminar once a month on Saturdays. There is no organizational or financial support for the co-mentoring circle beyond using 90 minutes of the monthly internship seminar for the co-mentoring circle. There is no recruitment of participants for the co-mentoring circle, as they are already students in the Principal Certification Program, attending the required monthly internship seminar. There is no matching as the interns participate as co-mentors to each other within the circle. Communication about the structure of the co-mentoring circle is completed during the first several seminars.

Operational Definition

The definition of co-mentoring used in the formation of the co-mentoring circles draws on the work of Kochan and Trimble (2000) and Mullen (2005). Mullen (2005) defines co-mentorship as when "individuals or groups proactively engage in reciprocal teaching and learning and transform power structures to honor egalitarianism" (2005, p. 25). Mullen's call for an examination of the power structures inherent in the mentoring relationship is foundational to the work in forming the co-mentoring circle, as is Kochan and Trimble's examination of the idea of "collaboration, shared decision-making, and systems thinking" (2000, p. 20). The co-mentoring circle is a form of peer group co-mentoring.

Theoretical Framework and Typology

The author's foundational view of mentoring draws from the work of Fletcher and Ragins (2007) and relational cultural theory (RCT). RCT has three tenets: interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions, and systemic power. The three tenets of RCT were considered in the formation of the co-mentoring circle. The co-mentoring circle draws on the tenets of both RCT and the definitions of co-mentoring (Kochan & Trimble, 2000) and co-mentorship (Mullen, 2005). The co- mentoring participants meet as a group of usually fewer than 12 participants. The typology of this mentoring is a facilitated peer group (see Chapter 3 on diverse forms of mentoring relationships).

Mentoring Inputs and Resources

Co-mentoring circles are described in the first seminar, and the 10 components used to form the co-mentoring circles are incorporated into the seminar coursework.

Curriculum Description
This section will highlight each component in the formation and assessment of co-mentoring circles (see Figure 20.1).

Figure 20.1

Ten Components Used to Form the Co-Mentoring Circle
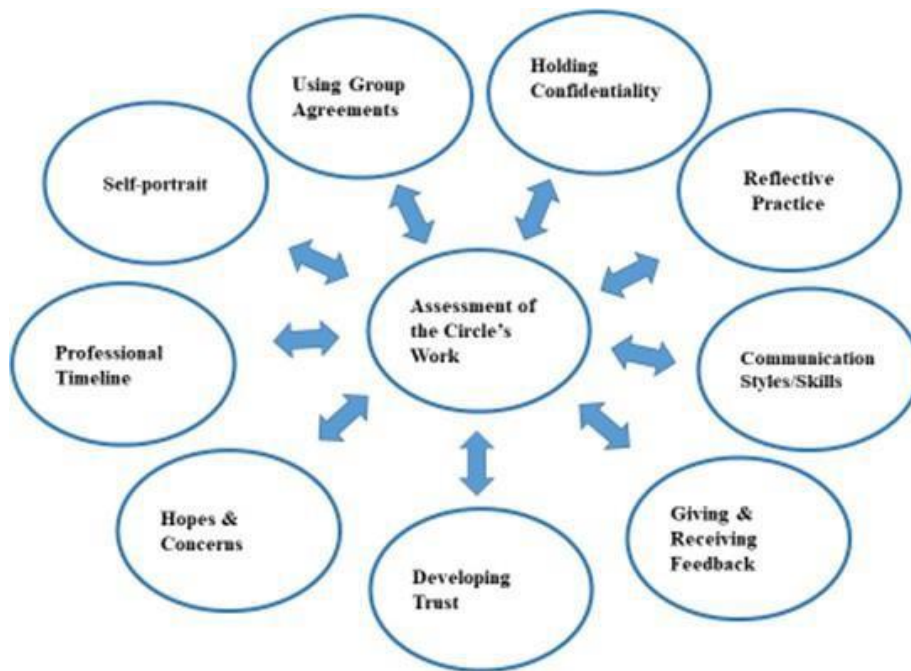
The group agreements, attentive listening, appreciation, no put-downs, mutual respect, and the right to pass (Gibbs, 2006, p. 71) are offered to circle participants as a starting point to discuss how we will treat each other. We discuss the agreements by acting out how they might look and sound. The agreements are reaffirmed each time we meet, and if there were to be a concern about upholding the agreements, as the facilitator, I would discuss this within our circle until it was resolved.

Holding confidentiality is the standard for circle participation. We conduct self-checks on whether confidentiality is holding before each circle begins. We practice a form of deep confidentiality from The Courage to Lead©, called "double confidentiality" (Center for Courage & Renewal, 2017). In double confidentiality, only the person who brought up a specific topic may bring it up again.

I teach the practice of reflection during the co-mentoring circles (see Arredondo-Rucinski, 2005; Dewey, 1938; Rodgers, 2002). Time is reserved at each circle for silence and written reflection. I read the reflections, and I respond to each writer.

Communication styles and skills are studied (Alessandra & O'Connor, 2017, 2018) along with Zachary and Fischler's (2014) model for mentoring conversations. We seek to have conversations at a level that Zachary and Fischler call "collaborative engagement" (2014, p. 168), in which participants strive to be vulnerable, sharing concerns or fears with each other. This level of conversation can happen if there is trust in the relationships. While not all co-mentoring conversations achieve this level of engagement, we strive to be open and transparent. Participants have commented that having conversations at this level builds trust, is helpful in working through concerns, and provides a safe, supportive place to work with others who understand the unique role of an intern.

Giving and receiving feedback is key to the daily practice of a school leader (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). School leaders give feedback on lessons and on actions taken by staff and students, and they must know how to give feedback in a manner that neither inhibits the receiver from engaging with the feedback nor unnecessarily engenders anger or hurt. We practice the skills of giving and receiving feedback in the co-mentoring circle as we offer support to one another for the issues brought to the circle. We also study giving and receiving feedback from the non-evaluative perspective of a "critical friend," where the aim is to elevate the work we do (Costa & Kallick, 1993) and not to offer judgments unless requested.

Developing trust comes from study, reflection, and our work together. In forming the circle, we do not make assumptions about trust. Participants study and discuss the work of Tschannen-Moran (2007, 2014) and an article by Combs et al. (2015), which encourages us to examine trust-building practices. Discussions and activities during the formation of the circle give us opportunities to deepen trust with each other.

The "hopes and concerns" activity seeks to build trust among the circle participants. Participants anonymously list a hope and a concern they have for their principal internship on a Post-it Note, or on a Google Doc for classes held over Zoom. After the notes are posted, we review the notes. A volunteer moves the notes, putting similar notes together. When participants see that there are similar notes, this builds a deeper sense of camaraderie.

In the "professional timeline" activity, participants share a visually displayed timeline. Sharing these timelines, posted to our electronic classroom platform, provides opportunities to highlight areas of expertise. For example, if you know a fellow circle participant has special education experience and you have a question in that area, you have a ready-made co-mentoring expert.

The "self-portrait" activity is completed after trust, confidentiality, and our group agreements are well established. I conceived the self-portrait activity based on the qualitative methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Participants express that they feel a closeness or connection with their fellow circle members after the activity.

One circle member's self-portrait focused on when her father was critically burned in an accident that destroyed their family business. Her father was airlifted to a trauma center located hours away. During the months of her father's recovery, her mother stayed near the hospital. The memories of what happened during those months she was caring for her sister have influenced her philosophy of leadership. Here is a self-portrait snippet from this participant:

> For the rest of my life, I will carry in my heart all of the kind things that people did for our family during such a difficult time for us. Unfortunately, I will also always remember the teacher who sent home a poor progress report for my sister with a note written in red ink, "Return with parent signature." I was furious when she showed it to me. I thought that everyone knew that my Mom was sitting by my Dad's bedside . . . while he recovered. This teacher even had to turn past the spot where my Dad's shop had been to get home each day. As I have worked with families experiencing trials and tragedies over the years, I have remembered how this felt and have done my very best to help them feel cared for and supported. Whether through tragedy or triumph,

every student and family should feel wholly cared for and supported by the school.

Formative assessment of the circle's work occurs at the conclusion of each circle as time is given for oral and written reflection and assessment. Circle participants complete a written reflection and assessment of the circle's work after each circle concludes. After each circle ends, I take time to reflect and record field notes. Each semester new interns enter our Principal Certification Program. This continual onboarding of interns new to the program provides an opportunity for returning interns to provide information about their experiences to help answer new interns' questions.

After the components establishing the co-mentoring circle have been completed, the circle continues to meet once a month for 90 minutes. The circle participants send topics they want to discuss, and we finalize the topics for that day's circle together. Topics have included: handling substitute teacher shortages, responding to TikTok challenges, communicating about master schedule changes, managing quarantine of students who test positive for COVID-19, complying with mask- wearing requirements, classroom walk-through protocols and recording forms, and supporting staff through grief and loss. We begin each circle with a reaffirmation of our group agreements and our code of confidentiality.

Funding

No funding is specifically allocated for the circle as it occurs within the required coursework.

Mentoring Activities

There is no selection or recruitment of participants for the co-mentoring circle as the interns are already students in the Principal Certification Program, attending the required monthly internship seminar where the co-mentoring circle is held. There is no matching because the interns participate as co-mentors to each other within the circle. The training activities and strategies to monitor and support relationships are documented in the 10 components of the circle formation (Figure 20.1) and through checking in on the group agreements, confidentiality code, and communication styles and skills each time the circle meets, and through oral and written reflection. Formative evaluation is conducted both orally and in writing following each circle session, and summative evaluation is completed at the end of each semester and when interns complete the program.

Mentoring Outputs

There have been 76 participants in co-mentoring circles over the past 7 academic years. Table 20.1 shows the number of participants per academic year.

Table 20.1

Co-Mentoring Circle Participant Totals by Academic Year

Academic year	Participant total
2014-2015	8
2015-2016	6
2016-2017	14
2017-2018	10
2018-2019	13
2019-2020	15
2020-2021	10

Note. Total of 76 participants

Mentoring Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Over the past 7 years, I have refined the co-mentoring circle process based on assessment by co-mentoring circle participants, my continued study of other mentoring programs, and scholarship. I have presented my co-mentoring circle process at conferences and received helpful feedback. I have a constellation of mentors who have given me opportunities to speak and write about the development of the process and encouraged my continued work. Formative assessment is completed by interns, orally and in writing, after each circle, and summative assessment at the end of each semester and as interns complete the program.

Outcomes of Program

During the past 7 academic years, there have been 56 assessment opportunities, both in oral discussion and written assessments, that have been completed by the 76 circle participants. Overwhelmingly, in both oral and written assessments, co-mentoring circle participants have expressed how helpful co-mentoring circles were. Here are a few samples of assessment data:

- "I need to be with others who really understand the work I do every day and won't judge me."

- "I'm so thankful for my co-mentoring connections."

- "After you have shared a really personal part of who you are, and what it meant to you, you feel like you have a bond within our circle. That you have others who 'get' you and you can share other problems without worrying about what they might think of you."

This continued positive assessment by circle participants, interwoven with continued opportunities to speak, write, and study about co-mentoring circles, continues to buoy my work in the continued refinement of co-mentoring circles.

Sustaining the Program

Through the participants' reflections and assessments, along with presenting at conferences,

publishing about the process, and discussing it within my department, I continue to receive feedback that helps refine future co-mentoring circles.

Lessons Learned

Start first with the development of group agreements and confidentiality among all participants, and then continue to assess the group processes such as communication styles and skills and giving and receiving feedback to affirm that trust is growing. I have found that taking the time to focus on these components provides rewards of deeply supportive, long-lasting co-mentoring relationships.

Recommendations for Future Designers and Stakeholders of Academic Mentoring Programs

Co-mentoring circles can be used in a variety of settings in which participants are involved in internships, residencies, or as in-service practitioners. I have used this process with aspiring school leaders and assistant principals with success and have discussed using it with medical practitioners.

My recommendation for future mentoring program designers is to consider a co-mentoring circle approach, starting first with the development of trust and confidentiality among all participants and then continuing to assess the group processes and outcomes.

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