

***Peer Coaching Groups celebrated inside a global business leader***  
**Microsoft Discovers the Training Power of the Unbroken Circle**

**Overview**

Global brands are rigorously complex organizations run by highly skilled leaders who are usually moving at light speed. Among these super organizations operating diverse and dynamic business units around the world is Microsoft. Despite its size, employee development holds a very high priority in the company — especially among its thought leaders — and it is viewed by many as a competitive business strategy: Hire the best and brightest to best grow mindshare and market strength.

Microsoft discovered that one way to accomplish that resided in the establishment of a circle — a “Learning Circle,” as they call it, a customized Peer Coaching Group designed by Authenticity Consulting LLC. The Learning Circles help achieve numerous goals for Microsoft’s internal, state-of-the-art leadership development program with participants from around the world. The dynamics of setting up such a Learning Circle program are almost as instructive as the tremendous results and glowing feedback that the Learning Circles generated — all the way to the top of this giant corporation!

In the beginning

In 2006, the company’s Sales, Marketing and Service Group (SMSG) reviewed its Best Practices and internal research about Professional Development, and then established key goals for its world-wide, high-potential, leadership development program to:

- Link formal learning with on-the-job experiences
- Increase cross-collaboration
- Share support and accountabilities for results
- Customize action and learning plans

**Challenge**

These goals had to be achieved among a large number of diverse participants from around the world – and in a rapid, low-cost and highly scalable fashion.

“Because we were working with Microsoft employees from different cultures who possess a variety of learning preferences, the process had to be simple, yet impactful,” noted Karan Rhodes, Microsoft’s Global Program Manager, Leadership Development. There also had to be a strong return on investment. To achieve those goals, it was decided that the program would need to be peer-based — but it was not yet clear how peers could be structured, trained and supported throughout such a novel program. Given the intelligence level and fast-paced workplace of the participants who preferred fast-paced training, the peer program had to get it right the first time. There would be little patience for experimentation.

The SMSG set out to vet consulting companies from around the world through an RFP and follow-up interviews with final prospects. The Seattle-based monolith found an ideal vendor in the land of 10,000 lakes.

### **Solution**

Microsoft selected Minneapolis-based Authenticity Consulting because its personnel brought, in Rhodes' words, "deep background in the Action Learning and coaching style, and they virtually 'owned' the Peer Coaching Group model and were very passionate about it." The company was also chosen for its:

- Proven track record of quickly customizing successful peer programs for a variety of desired results
- Willingness to customize the process to suit the nature and needs of Microsoft
- Ability to roll out numerous groups in diverse cultures around the world
- Strong experience in management roles inside large corporations

Authenticity Consulting's principals, Carter and Teri McNamara, along with their team of trainers worked with SMSG's People and Organizational Capacity group and formed a design team. Together they worked at customizing the peer program in a highly collaborative partnership, including the adaptation of a guidebook and various tools for trainers, facilitators and group members to understand and apply the peer group process and agenda.

The design team also set structures and ground rules to ensure confidentiality among group members, plus a way to measure progress of the groups and members. In several short, virtual sessions, Microsoft's leadership development and program personnel were oriented to the peer process. The successful collaborative effort during the quick and efficient ramp-up period inspired trust in Authenticity and its model.

Microsoft grew so confident in the peer coaching process that it decided to develop 50 Circles of six-to-seven people across the Americas region and forgo the short pilot process with several groups that Authenticity typically does with clients. Concurrently, Authenticity worked with program personnel in the company's other global regions to customize a peer process and materials that suited their cultures, too, including Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific, Japan, China and India.

Highly skilled in coaching, training and group facilitation in a variety of settings and cultures, Authenticity's trainers were deployed around the globe to train Microsoft facilitators about that region's particular peer coaching process and agenda (to help reduce expenses, some trainings were conducted virtually). In select regions, Authenticity consultants also taught the core coaching skills needed for members to get the most out of their Circles.

### Inside the Learning Circles

"There are very few opportunities when top talent inside Microsoft can meet each other in meaningful ways and get their thinking structured in a way that makes them more self-aware and able to more easily share the issues they face in their departments," noted Rhodes. "The Peer Coaching experience in the Learning Circles has huge value for the participants and our

company; in the first year the program's evaluation score was 98%." Besides high approvals, Rhodes also cited the substantial benefits gleaned from the Learning Circles:

- They create deep trust in a very short amount of time
- Among participants, they build stronger personal and professional relationships — and it's all about relationships!
- The value-adds are superb: As academics steeped in thorough research about action learning and peer coaching, Authenticity is able to quickly adapt their Circles program to any company
- Flexibility: Authenticity is adept at any mid-course corrections
- Circles can be used to enhance other development programs, such as Microsoft's exciting, internal, online career development program which integrates Circles for its learners

### **Result**

The Circles have been so successful in Microsoft's development programs that they now are in their third year and are in use in five different programs in the company, from employee onboarding to training new college hires. Another successful application currently combines the peer coaching group process (multiple-project Action Learning) with single-project Action Learning in a leadership development program for experienced leaders in the company. For Rhodes — who received a company award, in part, because of the success of the Circles — and those others exposed to this highly effective coaching paradigm, "this fantastic partnership" seems far from ending any time soon.

"The enormous success of the Circles has reached the COO level, where Authenticity Consulting was mentioned as one of its top three vendors. This very well could become a legacy training platform for Microsoft," Rhodes notes. Whatever happens next, the success of the Circles will be memorialized: Shannon Wallis, Director of Microsoft's Worldwide Leadership Programs, has co-written a chapter for a book — including the Learning Circles — titled, *Best Hires, Best Companies: How the World's Leading Companies Recruit, Motivate, and Retain Their Best Employees* (Louis Carter and Marshall Goldsmith, Jossey-Bass, coming in January 2010).

"Authenticity's peer Circles were incredibly successful and surpassed our expectations!" Wallis exclaimed. The Circle surely remains unbroken.