

The Circle Technique in Organizational Change

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Summary - From the solution-focused approach to change, a simple technique has emerged that often helps to stimulate discussion about organizational change: the circle technique. Read in this article how this technique works and what you can achieve with it.

If you feel attracted to experimenting with the circle technique, we are interested in your experiences and are ready to answer your questions.

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Organizational change

Organizations are almost continuously faced with large and small change projects. These changes may concern structural matters such as changing the primary process, merging departments, introducing systems, or changing the management structure. Changes can also relate to aspects of culture and cooperation, such as improving customer orientation, enhancing cooperation, increasing productivity and so on.

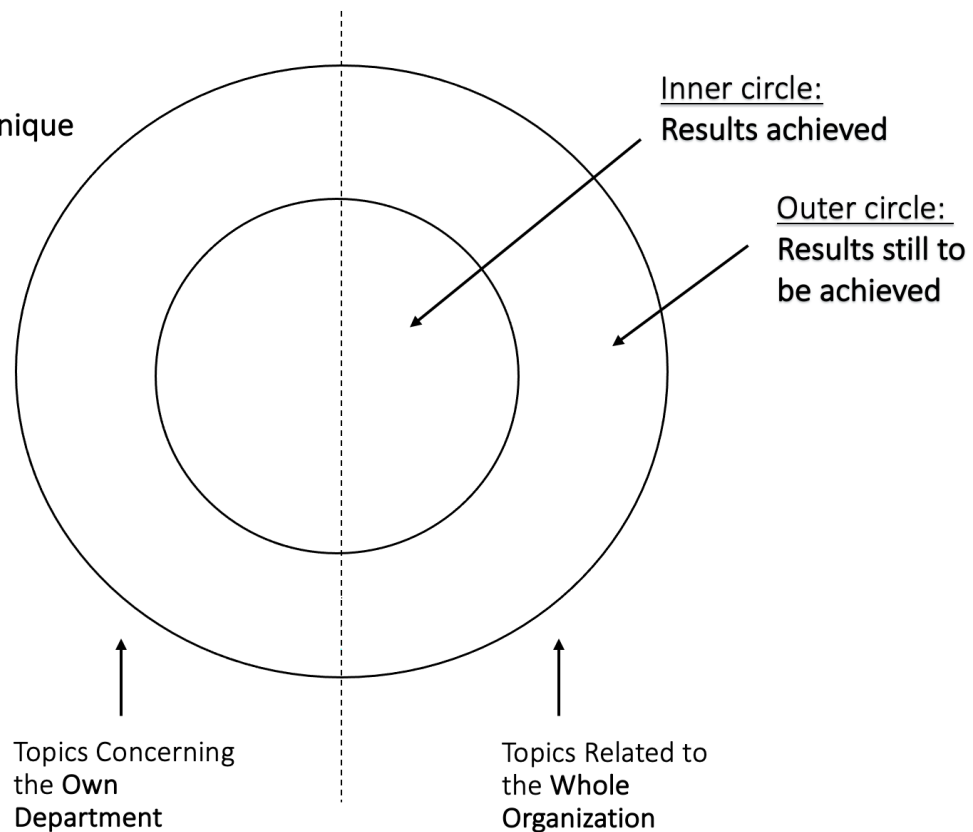
Communicating progress

In change projects with a somewhat longer lead time, it is very important to keep communicating about the objectives and about the progress of the change process. Our observation is that meetings about organizational change tend to concentrate on two topics: 1) what is not going well and 2) what should we do about it? When these two questions are central to a meeting, the result is often disappointing. Participants can become discouraged by what is not going well and overwhelmed by what still needs to be done.

The circle technique

The solution-focused approach to change has produced a simple technique that often helps to make consultations about organizational change more stimulating: the circle technique. In this technique the chairman of the meeting (or the process facilitator) draws two circles, an inner circle, and an outer circle on a flip-over sheet. In the inner circle the participants write down what they have already achieved during the meeting and in the outer circle the participants write down what they still need to achieve. It is also useful to divide the circle into two parts, with *the left half* containing improvements and improvement targets related to the own department and *the right half* containing those related to the whole organization. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Circle technique



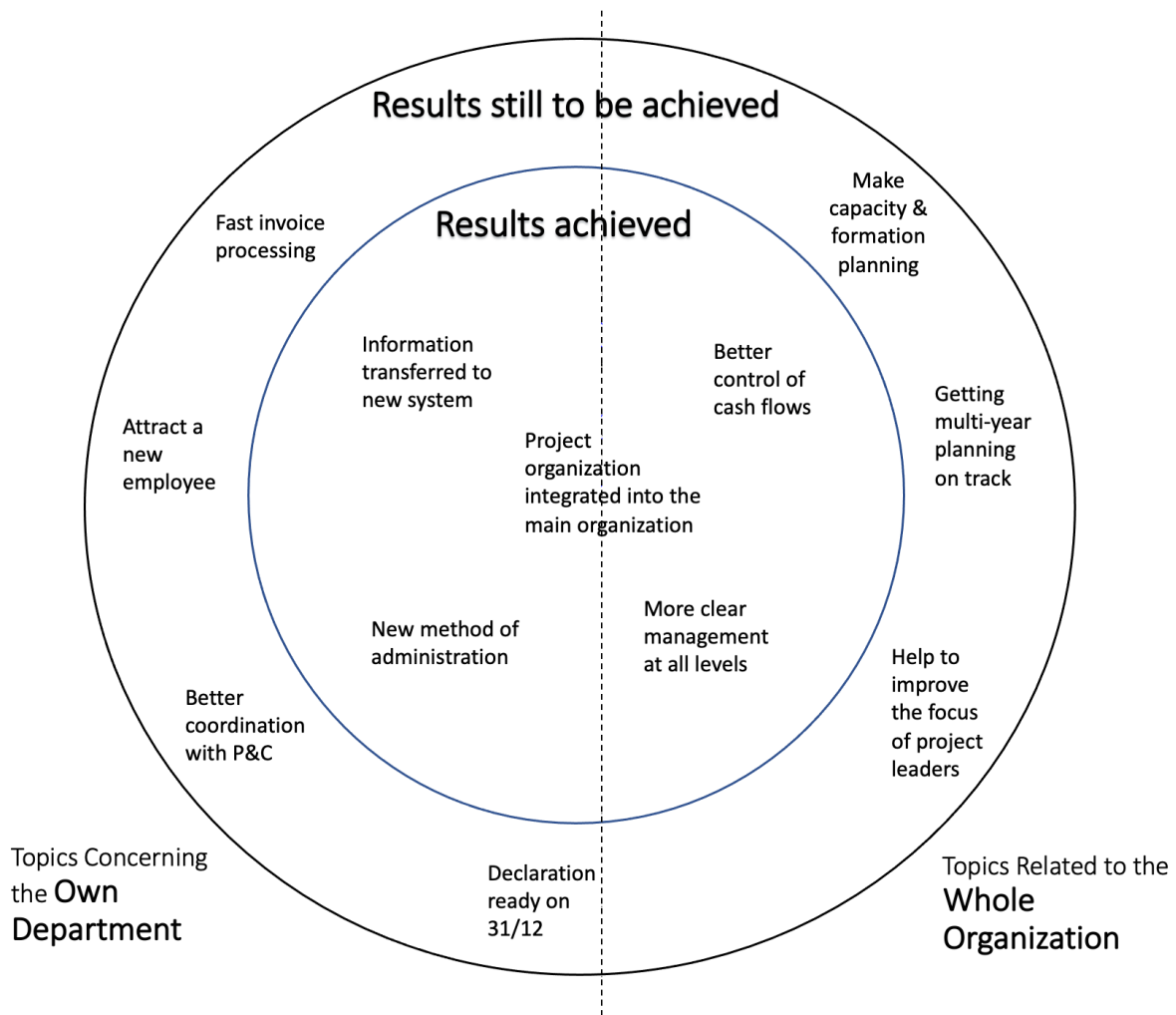
Method

The circle technique is very flexible. It can be used in one-to-one situations, in small and in large groups. In small groups, a serial approach often works well. The process counsellor can make an inventory per person of improvements that have already been made and aspects that still need to be improved. In larger groups, it is sometimes better to work with a parallel approach. Those present can mention examples of improvements and goals. It can also work well to split a large group into subgroups and let the subgroups fill in their own circles. The outcomes can then be discussed in plenary and, if desired, be integrated.

Positive terms

The circle technique works best if the words that appear in the circles are expressed as much as possible in terms of concrete positive results. The process facilitator plays an important role in this. For example, when people initially formulate an improvement objective in terms of a complaint ("management never comes to the work floor"), it may be that the process counsellor asks for the term "management involvement" to be entered into the circle. In this way, the complaint is reformulated in terms of the presence of something (e.g., 'regular consultation') instead of the absence of something (e.g., 'far too little interest in our work').

A manager of a department filled in the circle together with his departmental staff and came up with the following representation of realized improvements and improvement goals.



Goals

When the circles are filled, the process facilitator focuses on the outer circle. First, he asks the participants to prioritize the goals. Often it works best to set no more than one or two goals. If time permits, one can think about each goal and determine the approach to be followed. If desired, the technique of scales can be used. On a scale of 0-10, one can indicate how this point stands now and what a small, feasible step forward would be. It would take us too far to go into the technique of scaling in this article, but those who are interested can read more here:

Advantages

Applying the circle technique has several advantages. Firstly, the technique is very simple and purposeful. The technique enforces the essence: making progress in the desired direction. When taking stock of what has already been achieved, we often notice that the participants in the discussion are often positively surprised about how much has already been achieved. This often instils pride and confidence. Furthermore, it is very pleasant that everyone leaves the meeting room with concrete goals. Using the circle technique can provide a useful impulse in a change process.

NB: Any omissions in the translation of the Dutch original are the sole responsibility of Jos Kienhuis.