

Want to Improve Your Learning? Don't Even Try to Think Straight!

By Ken Homer, Founder of Collaborative Conversations

In pre-modern times, when all we had was either moonlight or candlelight to find our way in the dark, people had a way of orienting to the world that was largely based on the circle. In spite of our technological advances, it's difficult to find a more effective teaching tool than the circle. The old Taoists recognized that energy moves in circles. Agrarian-based peoples, and until very recently in our history that included virtually all of us, saw the cycle of night and day and cycle of the seasons as unfolding along a circular path. From the advent of the Agricultural Revolution some 10,000 years ago, up to the late stage of the Industrial Revolution, say mid-20th Century onward, the circle was the primary organizing metaphor for much of our thinking. The circular approach to looking at life helped us to capture and recall the learning that eventually leads to wisdom.

Of course, today's digitally mediated world, with its bits and bytes moving at near light speed, has greatly increased the pace and complexity that we deal with in life, rendering the idea of a circle rather a quaint notion; especially when it comes to managing projects or people. Yet, if the circle held sway for so long, then perhaps, in our headlong rush into modernity, we may have lost connection to some valuable ways of thinking and learning that could serve us well if they were reclaimed. The resurgence of circle-based thinking as demonstrated by the rise and embrace of "Cradle-to-Cradle" business models and notion of "[The Circular Economy](#)" seem to be examples of this.

In this post, I'd like to reintroduce a very old circle, one easily recognizable to those who still maintain close ties to the land, so if you are a gardener, this will no doubt be familiar to you. This particular circle combines the attributes of indigenous wisdom and folklore with four simple questions that orient us to the stages and phases of life. These same stages and phases apply in the realm of business, and using a circle to help us track what is important is as useful to leaders and managers as it is to farmers and gardeners.

Here's one version of a very old way of looking at the world:



Notice the questions that accompany each of the directions. We'll begin in the east with dawn, spring, the element of fire, and the energy of new life entering the world. The question of how to support what is being born in the world applies just as much at the start of a new project as it does at the start of a new life. Anyone with care, interest and expertise can help to midwife a project into existence. The job of a midwife is to work with what is trying to emerge to support an easy transition from womb to world. In addition to inquiring how to midwife what's being born we might add a few other useful questions such as:

- What exactly is it that we are attempting to create here?
- What kind of nourishment (time, attention, expertise, etc.) will it require?
- What do we intend to have happen as a result of our efforts?
- How does it fit in with the larger pattern that we are working to create?

Turning to the south we find ourselves at noon, summer, the element of water and the energy of growth. Here we're faced with the question of supporting that which has taken root and is growing on its own. We need to shift our focus here and consider how to work with this much more mature energy. The element of water gives us some clues.

- What is flowing here?
- Where is flow impeded?
- What do we need to weed, prune, or fertilize?
- What is the simplest most elegant step we can take that brings forth the optimal result with the least amount of effort?

Turning to the west we find ourselves facing dusk, autumn, the time of harvesting, dying, gathering, holding on and letting go. Just as we needed to become midwives to bring something new into the world, we now need to become hospice workers to support a smooth transition for that which is passing away and returning to the earth, which is the element associated with this direction. The fruits of our labors form the ground upon which we judge value of our work. Here the questions take the form of:

- What value did we produce?
- What is worth harvesting?
- What needs to be let go of?
- How can we use the fruits of our labors to sustain us during the upcoming fallow time?

Turning to the north we confront the darkness of midnight, the cold of winter and the thin element of air – associated in many traditions with mental energy. This is the time for resting, celebrating – before the Industrial Revolution, winter was filled with feasts and celebrations – and sharing ourselves with each other while we save the seeds from our harvest over the winter to be planted again in the spring to bring forth another cycle of life. In an age of machines (smart or otherwise) it's easy to forget, as we so often do, that we live half our life in the dark and that the darkness is fruitful. Rest is what renews and regenerates life. Constant work, with no time to stop and acknowledge our efforts and no time to celebrate our accomplishments leads not to greater productivity but to breakdowns in the fabric of our lives, our families and our cultures, eventually bleeding out to fracture the very foundations that make life possible. The question of how to conserve what sustains the world is complemented by:

- What did we do that is worth celebrating?
- What did we learn that is worth remembering?
- What do we want to do differently next time around the wheel?
- How are the results of our work making the world safer, saner and more livable?

The circle is the perfect metaphor and organizing model for iterative processes and for consolidating and sharing our learning. How can you map a project or phase of your business to the circle and gain insight from the questions offered?