**Learning in Common Space®: Harnessing the wisdom of the community**

By Angelika Gaßmann

It is no longer a secret: swarm intelligence is extremely successful. The concept of "Common Space®" shows how it can be used in workshops to solve complex problems and to address individual concerns. The prerequisite for this is a learning culture of togetherness in which the participants trust each other and really contribute their potential.

In his book "Minimum", Frank Schirrmacher describes the story of the settlers of Donner Pass. In 1846, a larger group of 81 people set out with their covered wagons. Families and individual young men get stuck in a snowstorm in the Sierra Nevada. It is not until the spring of 1847 that a rescue party is able to get to the people. Who survived? It was those who were traveling in families. Of those traveling alone, all had perished.

We have not yet tapped the potential that lies in the community, in a group, a team, a commune, a society. We still believe too much that the individual, the "hero," must and can overcome the challenges.

**The importance of the "shared space”**

The reasoning behind the idea of Common Space® is actually obvious: by entering such a common space, each individual leavestheir own limited space. Together with others, ~~he~~ they enter~~s~~ a space that contains a wealth of possibilities far beyond ~~his~~ their own. What if all the experience and knowledge that exists in a room could be used? What if trainers, teams or even companies could design an atmosphere where it is a joy to ask questions, try out things and share experience consistently with others?

The other image of space has a lot to do with how trainers and participants open up the inner space within themselves and find it possible to live more from connectedness and what has already succeeded than from deficits and what separates.

The Common Space® concept shows how this wealth of possibilities can be unlocked for the individual participants, but also for the goals of the company.

**Further development of the Open Space idea**

Open Space was developed as early as 1983 by Harrison Owen. Owen's insight was that the most effective conversations for participants often took place during coffee breaks, i.e., in an atmosphere "free of" - free of constraints, tight specifications, and control as they still characterize classic events, and educational offerings today: There is the fixed agenda, defined roles, methods, and participants. As a rule, tend to be characterized by a passive attitude on the part of the participants. Owen's method uses the effects of break conversations. Participants determine what they want to talk about under a guiding theme, set the agenda, and participate according to their interests. “Open Space" makes do with few structural elements and rules. Self-organization and self-direction of the participants characterize the concept. Free space also means free of constraints, free of hierarchies - all participants have equal rights.

Common Space® has developed these ideas further but is based on a different attitude in its core. Common Space® is not a space "free from", but a space "free for". It is the space for the experience that answers to individual as well as overarching concerns can be found through community and action in solidarity.

In order to work effectively in this "common space" and to achieve the best possible results, the concept consistently follows the principles of learning guidance according to Kemper/Klein in its implementation: participant-, biography-, competence-, reflection-, learning interest-, or concern- and process-orientation.

**Common Space® is a method in which the potential of the community is used to solve individual and overarching challenges by assuming responsibility and acting in solidarity in a carefully controlled process. It can be successfully applied in educational work as well as in the context of organizational development processes.**

**Responsibility**

The concept of "responsibility" takes a central position in Common Space®. In many companies, continuing education is still characterized by events in which the knowledge and experience of the participants are given little attention or even worse, a competitive situation is provoked between participants and trainers as to who knows better. In Common Space®, responsibility is shared. Everyone is an "expert". Each and every one can and may contribute their part. Together, the good answers emerge. Shared responsibility means a transparent approach at all times of the process, an agreement with each other on what and how something happens.

The success of a Common Space® workshop stands and falls with careful, yet stringent process control. On the one hand, it is the task and responsibility of the trainers to provide the necessary scope for autonomous learning, during which new, very valuable insights can emerge. On the other hand, they ensure that the available and agreed time slots are adhered to.

The participants assume personal responsibility in this process. Each and every one decides whether, how, at what time and with which form of desired support they give their "concern" to Common Space®. At the same time, it means for the individuals to take responsibility for the others, to make their own experiences and competences available.

In contrast to Open Space, there are therefore no "bumblebees" in Common Space®. "Bumblebee" means that participants can move from group to group. This does not fit with solidarity behavior. Imagine that someone has a personally very meaningful matter and while it is being worked on, someone else gets up and leaves.

**Real concerns instead of arbitrary topics**

The linchpin of Common Space® is alignment with concerns. To this end, participants are encouraged to formulate their respective matters. The guiding principle is that a concern must be important and urgent to them. Clarifying the concerns is a crucial step: Already now, in formulating the concerns, the participants leave the passive role that is typical for many educational events. Instead of waiting to see what the trainers will present, they start thinking for themselves: "What is my specific concern that I would like to bring to the table? Where is the shoe pinching me, what is causing me sleepless nights? What needs to change in my team? The participants support each other in pairs to clarify their concerns.

The principle of voluntariness is an essential aspect of this process. No one is forced to bring a concern to the table. Nor do they have to comment on the concerns of another participant. Rather, the rule is that anyone who cannot or does not want to contribute to the solution of a concern must stay out of it. With this, groups are created that can really contribute to the topic and where people honestly engage with each other.

**Participant Journey through a two-day Common Space® leadership workshop Common Space®-Journey using the example of two participants**

**Tom,** *30 years old, has been a team leader responsible for 15 employees for one and a half years and is reflecting on his current leadership situation. Over the last few months, he has found himself under increasing pressure. Two positions have been vacant for some time. All efforts to fill them quickly have so far been unsuccessful. The shortage of skilled workers leaves little hope.*

**Anna**, *45 years old, has been a division manager responsible for 35 employees for eight years. She feels comfortable in her leadership role. Nine months ago, however, her supervisor changed. Since then, she has felt under constant pressure to justify her decisions. She tries not to let her insecurity show.*

**1. opening the Common Space**

Participants sit in a circle.

"Welcome. You are here because as a leader you experience situations in which you are annoyed, which occasionally may even deprive you of sleep. As a leader, you are often alone in this. Here in Common Space® you have the chance to use the knowledge, experience, and support of all of us here in the room. So, it is possible to get impulses for your own concern, to discover other perspectives, to try out new things."

During the opening, the trainers will give basic information about the philosophy, basic attitude, and the way of working of Common Space®:

- Wisdom of Community

- Responsibility

- Acting in solidarity

- Voluntariness

**2. Clarifying one's own concerns**

In contrast to the work in Open Space, a lot of space is given to the clarification of concerns in Common Space®.

Through different working steps the participants get the opportunity to approach their "real" concerns and to formulate them clearly. Two participants support each other in this process

The trainers give hints:

a) it is possible (at this point in time) that individuals are not able to express a concern.

b) a concern may change or become sharper in the course of the Common Space®.

c) a concern has been "resolved" because participants have found answers through the processing of other concerns, through content-related or personal impulses.

The participants write down their concerns on A4 sheets of paper.

They present their concerns and hang the sheet on the presentation bord

In the tandem work, **Anna** *talks about the changes brought about by her supervisor. While telling her story, she realizes "I need to get off the defensive and start talking to my new boss."*

*She articulates her concern, "How can I successfully position myself to my new boss?"*

*She writes down her concern and pins it on the facilitation wall.*

In tandem, **Tom** *talks about his tense staffing situation. On top of that, he reports, he has an unresolved conflict with a co-worker who doesn't follow office instructions and frequently makes long private phone calls on his personal cell phone. Other team members have expressed anger. "But I can't really afford to confront him. The last time I had a disputation meeting with him, he was out sick for three weeks. Another staffing shortfall would break our backs." Supported by the tandem work, Tom is able to formulate his concerns in a first version. "How can I have the conversation with the employee?"*

Afterwards, the trainers explain different ways of dealing with the concerns:

- Reflecting Team

- Counseling

- Theoretical input

- brainstorming

- Development of checklists

- Case simulation / role play

- Etc.

Participants then decide individually how to work on their concerns.

**Tom** *decides on a role play. He sees this as an opportunity to look at the situation from the outside and to get concrete ideas for conducting the conversation through the role play.*

**Anna** *decides on intervision. She hopes to get ideas for a good strategy for dealing with her new boss.*

**3. from the "concern wall" to processing**

The participants are asked ~~by the trainers~~ to take their concern from the "concern wall" and place it on the prepared "processing wall" with time and space specifications. This also symbolically demonstrates the acceptance of responsibility for one's own concern.

The participants work on their concerns largely on their own responsibility in (parallel) small groups or, if required and desired, in plenary sessions. After a set time, a short "pit stop" follows before the next groups start. In the pit stop, the trainers reflect on the findings together with the participants and determine the extent to which the concerns have been addressed. It is important that in addition to the insights of the person giving the concern, those of the other participants in their roles as facilitators or collegial advisors are also addressed. This gives equal credit to everyone's contribution. It also shows that learning is happening on all sides.

The work phase lasts until all concerns have been addressed.

**Tom** *decides not to take an active part in the role play. He instructs the participants in their roles and observes. He summarizes his findings in the reflection as follows: "For me, it was crucial to see in the role play how important it is in the conversation with the employee to describe his behavior exactly and also to make it clear to him what effect he thereby triggers with me and with the team.*

**Anna** *describes her situation with the new boss. The group members, as collegial advisors, ask questions of understanding and give Anna pointers on what she can do to position herself well. In the final reflection, Anna describes her findings, "It was essential ~~f~~or me to understand that I put myself in a passive role towards my new boss. I already know this about myself. I will now prepare myself specifically for a conversation with him. I got important tips for this from your consulting."*

**4. Closing the Common Space®**

After the intensive phase of working on the concerns, the Common Space® is closed with the transfer assurance and the joint reflection on the overall process. The participants support each other in concretizing the next steps for implementation in everyday life, as well as the support options available for this, and encourage each other personally.

**Experiences and outlook**

As in the story of the Settlers of Donner Pass, the philosophy of Common Space® is based on the assumption that in a team, in a company, in a society, there is potential that is far from being exhausted. Common Space® is based on values that can contribute to a cultural change in the company: Common Space® honors and protects the uniqueness of all employees and enables them to develop and contribute their potential. At the same time, it creates a sense of connection and fosters a culture of mutual respect and support.

**The author**

**Angelika Gaßmann** is an organizational consultant, trainer, coach, and owner of Angelika Gaßmann Personalentwicklung in Mosbach. She developed Common Space® 10 years ago and, together with Dr. Dirk Sichelschmidt, has continued to develop it to its current form.