



## Bebop as a Way to Build Community: An Exercise for Building Trust and Improving Communication

I have discovered something that I believe will help revolutionize the process of community development. I think it will change the world for the better and your family life too. It's a simple technique that anyone can learn in an afternoon, and in my experience it helps easily convey the core of natural systems thinking. This exercise subtly inoculates regenerative community dynamics into a communication dynamic and into a community. It has been known as the Consensus Building Process.

The core of the process is three simple questions. What are the worst possible outcomes? What are the best possible outcomes? What are the beliefs and behaviors necessary for the best possible outcomes to come about? The questions can be asked at any scale, from an individual thinking about their small business to a large group of people planning for community self-reliance. I've been calling the process the Wopout-Bepout-Bebe exercise, which is short for **worst possible outcomes-best possible outcomes-beliefs and behaviors**. I like the way it sounds, but even Wopout-Bepout-Bebe is too long, and in a permaculture design course in Patagonia, Arizona awhile ago it got shortened to "the bebop exercise." Hence the title of this article. Here's how we can start swinging our way into a harmonious future.

### **"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."**

Before I give you the details of the process, a little background is necessary. I graduated from a very small college with a unique teaching methodology: read books, talk about them, no lectures, no tests. After I graduated I had a very difficult time sitting through lecture periods of almost any length. I was frustrated because I wanted to DO what we were learning about, not have someone tell me things I had already read in a book. When I began teaching a few years after that however, I immediately began doling out the requisite lectures! I tried to include some discussion sessions and as much hand's on work as possible, but the feeling never left me that lecture was somehow not up to the radical vision the world requires.

One of my assumptions about teaching comes from the familiar saying that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. I interpret this in our context to mean that what we are trying to teach cannot be taught, it can only be learned. Dramatic shifts in paradigm are even harder if not impossible to teach. I like to use sailing as an analogy. If I regale you for hours about great sailors, recount tails of sailing lore, or maybe even sing and dance some provocative sailing songs, do you learn how to sail? Obviously, no; you can only learn to sail by sailing. You can become excited about the prospect of learning to sail, but you must grab the rudder and face the wind if you're really going to learn how to sail.

As we focus our attention on our imperiled planet and the transformative change needed at all levels to begin to heal our fractured communities and damaged soils, how will we learn



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what is needed? How will we change the way we think and make decisions so that we can create economic models that are socially responsible and environmentally sound? What if we had teaching methods and learning experiences that modeled the resilience and connectivity of natural ecosystems? Does such a question make any sense? What would such a “learning experience” look like? To coin a phrase, what is “regenerative learning?”

To play with this idea some it helps to create comparisons.

	Conventional education	Regenerative learning
<b>Process:</b>	Teachers teach/students learn	Everyone teaches, everyone learns
<b>Attitude:</b>	I'm the expert/you are ignorant	Community rules/we know it all
	I am full/you are empty	We are full and we share freely
<b>Method:</b>	Lecture	Group teaching-learning, immediate use
<b>Content:</b>	Technical solutions	Paradigm shifts ==> behavior changes
<b>Metaphor:</b>	Machine	Complex natural ecosystems
<b>Energy flow:</b>	Source to sink	Multiple cycles create yields
<b>Vectors:</b>	One-direction flows	Webs of relationships
<b>Patterns:</b>	Linear	Beneficial edges, guilds, rich feedback
<b>Dissemination:</b>	Slow	Rapid and competent
<b>Learning Style:</b>	Limited	All styles embraced and empowered
<b>Brain Use:</b>	Left brain	Whole brain-whole person
<b>Outcomes:</b>	Perpetuates hierarchies	Empowers everyone

When I had satisfied myself that regenerative learning is real and possible, and I had some idea of what it might look like, I needed some way to detect it and talk about it. The learning circle is one way to talk about what regenerative learning looks like. Practically as well as metaphorically this style of learning takes place in a circle. The kind of learning environment that is being created and the relationship between course participants are modeled after the circle or web. The circle suggests and enhances equality between the facilitator and the participants, and between all participants. It visually reinforces the notion of a web of relationships between everyone and helps strengthen the community. It also honors the need for diverse sources of information and inspiration, and builds a cohesive and comprehensive whole. The learning circle has as its focus a group intention for learning.

At this point I had outlined the ideal, what about reality? I needed real, specific exercises that brought the concepts of the learning circle and regenerative learning to life. To make sure that the search didn't get too easy I added in some other criteria: stacks functions, relatively low-tech, easily duplicated, and is easily improved upon. To unpack some of this jargon, an exercise that “stacks functions” will accomplish multiple outcomes at once. For example, the exercise could be a good stress-relieving movement exercise that also reinforces the



principles you're trying to teach. A "low-tech" exercise is one that doesn't require an overhead projector or slide projector; the exercise itself and the participants are the technology. By "easily duplicated" I mean that participants could learn the exercise and facilitate it later without much difficulty. No small task!

**"Circle up the wagons, we're gonna build us some consensus."**

Wandering around with this notion of the learning circle and regenerative learning, and all of these criteria, I stumbled over a process that seems to rise to the challenge beautifully. I was participating in a conference for Holistic Management™ educators. A portion of the weekend was facilitated by Jeff Goebel, a Holistic Management™ educator himself, who was leading the group through something called "The Consensus Building Process." A man named Bob Chadwick, who lives in Washington and is retired from the Forest Service, developed the process. Apparently he was tired of the endless polarized arguments so common in Forest Service work. He was searching for something to help build consensus and move groups beyond conflict. The process is a series of simple exercises and questions with quite profound effects. As I was driving home from the conference I realized that the Consensus Building Process was an example of what I had been looking for. It is an exercise that creates the learning circle environment, it stacks functions, it builds community and the necessary webs of connections, and it is easy to learn. In this context the emphasis is on building consensus, not necessarily on reaching consensus. This process is not used directly as a decision-making tool; it is more accurately a trust-building tool. It can be seen as a communication skill building or vision building exercise as well.

The whole process consists of three questions that are answered in turn by each person in the group. The group is usually broken into several smaller groups so that the members of each group will answer the three questions in turn. The three questions are

- What is the worst possible outcome?
- What is the best possible outcome?
- What are the beliefs and behaviors necessary for the best possible outcomes to come about?

The questions can be focused on whatever event or time span you are working in. For example, a teaching team may be thinking about the weekend workshop they are teaching together. Each of the questions is rephrased slightly. In this example the three questions would be "what is the worst possible outcome of this weekend workshop we're teaching together? what is the best possible outcome?" and, "what beliefs and behaviors do we need to have and practice for the best possible outcomes to come about in this workshop?" The process can be used with great effect as one of the opening pieces of any training, workshop or course, as I've mentioned above.

Enough philosophy, here's how to do it:

Break the group into at least two or perhaps more, smaller groups. The small groups should be no larger than around ten people, so divide whatever size class you've got into smaller groups. Within each small group ask one person to be the facilitator and one person the



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recorder. The facilitator's job in each group is to make sure that each person in the group gets a chance to speak, and that respectful listening is the standard. The recorder's job is to write down each person's reply exactly as it is said. This is very important. No one, including the recorder, should edit, paraphrase, or summarize anyone else's comments. Once each group has chosen a facilitator and a recorder, explain the roles and responsibilities of each.

Each person within each group answers in turn the first question "what is the worst possible outcome?" The question should be rephrased slightly for the workshop or course. Students should be encouraged to speak as honestly as possible.

The recorder writes on a flip chart what each person says exactly, without paraphrasing or editing. The recorder should ask for confirmation and corrections from the speaker, if necessary. The facilitator for each group makes sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. Once everyone has spoken, and had an opportunity to add more comments, ask the recorder of each group to read aloud each of the statements in turn. The recorders read the outcomes to the entire class. This process is very important and serves several purposes. The person who voices the outcome has the experience of everyone in the group listening respectfully to what they say. Then the statement is recorded exactly on the flip chart. With the reading of the individual statements out loud, each person has their words read to the whole group and heard by everyone. All of this reinforces the voice of each person in the group as it simultaneously builds a group identity and group trust.

The same process is done for the next two questions, "what are the best possible outcomes?" and, "what are the beliefs and behaviors that support these best possible outcomes?" It is important to not take a break after the worst possible outcomes round as this can reinforce the negative possibilities. Move along quickly and maintain focus on the positive vision being created. Each group changes their facilitator and recorder for each of the three rounds, allowing as many people as possible to take roles of responsibility within the group.

The facilitators for each group should be watch guarding their groups to ensure respectful listening and that everyone's voice is heard. The main role of the teaching team or facilitators of the class (you, I presume) is to watch for any editing of an individual's comments. Hover about and listen to make sure no one is edited or edits themselves. This is a critical role, as people will frequently allow themselves to be summarized or paraphrased incorrectly to avoid conflict. It is important to watch this carefully, to ensure that everyone in the group can speak freely in the circle.

After the first round, collect the worst possible outcomes sheets from each group and set them aside. If there is a fireplace or fire circle I usually put them there so the paper can be used as a fire starter. It is important for everyone in the group to express these negative possibilities, but equally important that the group not dwell on them. Collect the responses from the final two rounds and post them on the wall of the classroom. This helps create the



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center of focus for the class, and sets standards for their behavior that they will be living up to throughout the course, or whatever the situation is that has been focused on.

Give power to the group. Charge them with the responsibility of creating their reality and living up to the posted statements. If needed you can refer to the posted statements. Statements such as “how are we doing living up to what we talked about?” are usually very effectively.

**“It slices, it dices, it removes unwanted facial hair, it wins the election...”**

I have used this process in courses many times in the last several years. What I observe is that the level of respect and respectful listening is very high. It is very rare for anyone to interrupt anyone else. The jockeying for position and attention so common at the beginning of a course seems to be effortlessly dissipated. The whole tone of a course is different; it feels nurturing and supportive. The few times that I have not used the process since I first learned of it have been jarring. Perhaps I notice people’s interruptions more now, but the difference seems significant to me. I have also used the process interpersonally, when dealing with a seeming crisis or problem, also with great results.

This exercise is an excellent example of “scale-linking,” an exercise that is useful with only minor modifications for projects at different sizes or scales. It can be used at the personal level. Ask yourself what the best possible outcomes are for your life. How do you have to behave and believe in order for that to happen? I have found that it helps to voice the worst possible outcomes too; once I do I feel more committed to the project I’m working on. It helps clear away the cobwebs of doubt and fear. This process works nicely between two people or a couple, particularly when a conflict situation arises or there is a looming crisis that is scaring everyone. I don’t know the upper limit of a good size to work with. The largest group I’ve worked with is around 250. It is easy to subdivide a large group into groups of 10 or so. If there were 2000 people I think it could work, though it might be cumbersome, and take all day to complete the three rounds. According to the Mondragon Cooperatives 500 is about the upper edge of a community where everyone can at least recognize everyone else. My experience bears this out. The small college that I mentioned above was consciously limited to 400 people. At this level you almost know everyone’s name, you certainly know their gossip, and you immediately recognize any new flesh on campus.

When my sister unexpectedly became pregnant awhile ago, she was a little frightened to tell our parents. We went through this process, each voicing our vision of the worst possible outcome, the best possible outcomes, and how we each needed to behave and what we needed to believe for those best possible outcomes to come about. As it turned out, (and as I knew) my sister’s fears were unfounded; our parents were ecstatic. My mother’s first words were “thank you god.” My mother had been praying for grandchildren for several years. As I write this I sit at my computer with a picture of my niece holding my drum, looking as if she’s wailing out her heart’s beat. I cannot think of a better possible outcome. The beat goes on, down the generations, as we bebop our way into a harmonious future.