

## Introduction

The circle is a dialog process that works intentionally to create a safe space to discuss very difficult or painful issues in order to improve relationships and resolve differences. The intent of the circle is to find resolutions that serve every member of the circle. The process is based on an assumption of equal worth and dignity for all participants and therefore provides equal voice to all participants. Every participant has gifts to offer in finding a good solution to the problem.

The circle process is deliberate in discussing how the conversation will be held before discussing the difficult issues. Consequently, the circle works on values and guidelines before talking about the differences or conflict. Where possible the circle also works on relationship building before discussing the difficult issues.

The responsibility of the keeper is to help the participants create a safe space for their conversation and to monitor the quality of the space throughout the circle. If the atmosphere becomes disrespectful, it is the responsibility of the keeper to bring the group's attention to that problem and help the group re-establish a respectful space.

The following qualities are helpful in fulfilling that task:

- Patience
- Humility
- Deep listening
- Acceptance of everyone as worthy of respect
- Willingness to sit with uncertainty
- Ability to share responsibility

Using a circle process is not simply a matter of putting chairs in a circle. Careful preparation is essential to good practice in using circles.

## Preparation for a Circle

Convening people in a circle to resolve conflict requires significant preparation. There are three major tasks in preparing for a circle:

- Preparing the parties
- Planning the specifics of the circle
- Self preparation

**Preparing the parties** –The two Circle Co-Keepers together meet with each person who has agreed to participate in the circle individually. The purpose of the pre-meetings includes:

- Hearing the story or perspective of that person concerning the situation
- Explaining the process
- Answering questions about the process – how it works, who will be there, . . .

- Determining whether the person has any concerns about participating
- Identifying support people for the key parties to be invited to the circle
- Clarifying confidentiality and the exceptions
- Building a relationship so the person will trust the Co-Keepers in the process
- Checking on willingness to talk about the key issues with the entire circle
- Checking on willingness to listen to others who may have a different view

It is often helpful in the pre-meetings to emphasize that every participant has an equal chance to speak; that no one can interrupt whoever is speaking; and that it is always okay to pass if you do not wish to speak.

Based on the interviews with all of the circle participants the Co-Keepers:

- determine whether there are others whose participation could be helpful in the circle (e.g. supporters for the key parties in conflict, third parties who are respected by both of the key parties and are not aligned with either of the key parties on this issue, others who have been affected by the situation, etc.)
- identify the key issues that appear to be important to discuss in the circle

Information about the key issues is used to help formulate questions for the circle. If it becomes clear that additional people are appropriate for the circle the Co-Keepers inform the other participants, invite the additional people and conduct a pre-meeting with any additional participants.

**Planning the specifics of the circle** – The Co-Keepers begin putting together the circle plan answering the following questions:

- What time?
- Where?
- What will be the talking piece?
- What will be in the center?
- What opening ceremony will be used?
- What question will be used to generate values for the circle?
- What question will be used for an introduction or check-in round?
- Is there a need for further relationship building before getting into the issues? If so, how will that be done?
- What question(s) will be used to begin the dialog about the key issues?
- What further questions might be useful if the group is not getting deeply enough into the issues?
- What closing ceremony will be used?

The Co-Keepers together further develop the plan for the circle based on the questions above and the Circle Outline (p. --). The Co-Keepers also decide how to share the responsibilities of keeping the circle. The plan is always seen as flexible and open to modification according to the needs of the circle group.

**Self-preparation** - Preparing the parties to participate in circle and preparing the plan for engaging participants in the circle are very important parts of the preparation process.

There is one more critical part of preparation. That is self-preparation. The space of circle is not our normal space. It calls for intentional behavior that is aligned with the values as much as possible. That is not easy to do in the context of high pressure jobs and personal lives. Prioritizing time for self-preparation is a core responsibility of being a keeper.

Self-preparation has two dimensions:

- Preparation before a specific circle.
- Developing on-going habits which cultivate the qualities helpful in keeping a circle.

Self-preparation before a specific circle includes –

- Getting enough rest
- Eating properly
- Centering yourself
- Clearing the mind of other distractions
- Turning off your cell phone, pagers, etc.
- Arriving at the site in time to relax before the circle begins
- Breathing deeply and releasing tension as much as possible

Centering may be achieved through deep breathing, a walk outside, music, quiet time by yourself or whatever strategy works for you.

Developing on-going habits which cultivate the qualities helpful in keeping a circle includes -

*Working on personal growth* – Since keepers serve as models and set the tone for circles it is important that you undertake inner work. Engage in ongoing inner work, regularly checking your thoughts and behaviors against your core values and circle principles. Just before a circle gathering, take time to center yourself and cultivate inner peace.

*Self knowledge* – Know your stuff. We all have particular things that are challenging for us. We all have histories that may make us prone to having our buttons pushed by certain issues or types of personalities. Be aware of your buttons, your “stuff,” and how it might affect your keeping a circle. Perhaps you have a hard time knowing how to relate to loud, boisterous people, or perhaps your history makes it hard for you to be objective in discussions about a particular issue. Know your stuff and work at finding ways to keep it from getting in the way of your keeping.

*Self-care* – Keeping is emotionally challenging work. Especially during times when you are keeping a circle process, take care of yourself in ways that work for you. In your self-care try to include a balance of:

- *physical* – exercise, eat well, get enough sleep.
- *emotional* – probe and experience your feelings through reflection, journaling, or with friends.
- *spiritual* – meditate or participate in other spiritual practices.

- *mental* – find ways to stimulate your mind. Avoid over-analyzing your circle work: read a book, do a puzzle, engage in creative arts, whatever works for you.

## **Essential Elements of Constructing the Circle**

The Circle Keeper uses the following elements to design the circle and to create the space for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another and to seek resolution of their conflict or difficulty.

- **Seating of all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables)**
- **Opening ceremony**
- **Centerpiece**
- **Values/guidelines**
- **Talking piece**
- **Guiding questions**
- **Closing ceremony**

Seating of all participants in a circle – Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. That seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and be accountable to one another face to face. It also creates a sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of ‘sides’. A circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. Removing tables is sometimes uncomfortable for people, but is important in creating a space apart from our usual way of discussing difficult issues. It increases accountability because all body language is obvious to everyone.

Opening ceremony – Circles use openings and closings to mark the circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group. The clear marking of the beginning and end of the circle is very important because the circle invites participants to drop the ordinary masks and protections they may wear that create distance from their core self and the core self of others. Openings help participants to center themselves, bring themselves into full presence in the space, recognize interconnectedness, release unrelated distractions and be mindful of the values of the core self.

Centerpiece – Circles use a centerpiece to create a focal point that supports speaking from the heart and listening from the heart. The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, a shared vision of the group. Centerpieces often emphasize inclusion by incorporating symbols of individual circle members as well as cultures represented in the circle. Centerpieces can be collectively built with more and more representation of the group and the individuals in the circle as time goes on.

Guidelines – Participants in a circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion. The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the circle dialog. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the circle. They are not imposed on the participants but rather are adopted by consensus of the circle.

Talking piece – Circles use a talking piece to regulate the dialog of the participants. The talking piece is passed from person to person around the rim of the circle. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. It allows the holder to speak without interruption and allows the listeners to focus on listening and not be distracted by thinking about a response to the speaker. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection, and an unhurried pace. The talking piece is a powerful equalizer. It allows every participant an equal opportunity to speak and carries an implicit assumption that every participant has something important to offer the group. As it passes physically from hand to hand, the talking piece weaves a connecting thread among the members of the circle. The talking piece reduces the control of the keeper and consequently shares control of the process with all participants. Where possible the talking piece represents something important to the group. The more meaning the talking piece has (consistent with the values of circle), the more powerful it is for engendering respect for the process and alignment with the core self.

Guiding questions – Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of many rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the circle. Every member of the circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses.

Closing ceremony - Closings acknowledge the efforts of the circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Openings and closings are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness. In an on-going group participants may be involved in doing openings and closings or may design the opening and closing for the group.

## **Tips for Keepers**

Role of the Keeper in a circle - The keeper assists the group in creating and maintaining a collective space in which each participant feels safe to speak honestly and openly without disrespecting anyone else. The keeper monitors the quality of the collective space and stimulates the reflections of the group through questions or topic suggestions. The keeper does not control the issues raised by the group or try to move the group toward a particular outcome. The keeper's role is to initiate a space that is respectful and safe, and to engage participants in sharing responsibility for the space and for their collective work. The keeper is not an enforcer of the group guidelines. The responsibility for addressing

problems with the guidelines belongs to the entire circle. It is not the keeper's role to fix the problem the circle is addressing. The keeper is in a relationship of caring about the well-being of every member of the circle and is a participant in the circle.

---

Keeper role:

Help the group create a respectful space

Monitor the quality of the space as the circle proceeds

Draw the group's attention to any problems with the quality of the space

Invite the group to figure out how to improve the quality of the space

---

Designing effective questions – The shape of the question has enormous impact on the shape of responses. It is worth taking time to frame questions carefully. Effective questions are framed to:

- encourage participants to speak from their own lived experience (e.g. How have you been impacted? What has this situation been like for you? What has been the hardest thing for you? What do you need to move forward? What can you offer to help this situation?)
- invite participants to share stories from their lives (Share an experience when you . . .)
- focus on feelings and impacts rather than facts
- invite recognition of strengths or assets as well as the difficulties
- transition participants from the discussion of difficult or painful events into discussion of what can be done now to make things better.

The field of Appreciative Inquiry is a helpful resource for designing questions that probe strengths and move participants to identifying positive possibilities for going forward.

Appendix 1 Sample Prompting Questions is another resource for circle questions.

Questions should never invite attacks on another individual or group.

Managing time – It is important to share responsibility for managing time with the entire circle. When introducing the talking piece the keeper can remind people of the time parameters encouraging participants to say what is really important to them and to also keep in mind the importance of making sure everyone else has a chance to speak.

Helpful reminders about time may be appropriate during the circle as well. When establishing values or doing introduction rounds, it is sometimes useful to ask participants to limit their response to one or two sentences. It would generally not be helpful to limit participants when they are talking about the core issue of the circle.

Many of the issues that come to circles cannot be resolved in one circle. The process should not be rushed. Everyone needs to have opportunity to be heard. It's appropriate to continue the process over two or more circles as participants work through what they need to talk about and what they want to do to improve the situation. If the circle continues for more than one session bring the values/guidelines created in the first circle to all subsequent circles. Do an opening ceremony and check-in round before going back to the place that you left off in the previous circle.

Giving responsibility back to the group - If the talking piece comes back to you and you are uncertain about where the circle should go, it is okay to say, “I’m not sure where we should go from here,” and then pass the talking piece. Often someone in the group has an idea that is helpful. This technique allows you to demonstrate that leadership is a shared responsibility in the circle.

Using breaks - Breaks are a useful technique for managing difficult moments. On a break you can check in with anyone who seems to be struggling. After coming back from a break you can ask participants to look again at the values and review the guidelines before renewing the dialog.

Getting to the real issues – You may find that key issues raised by participants in pre-meetings are not being discussed in the circle. You should not raise those issues yourself but it is appropriate to ask questions or prompts encouraging participants to raise them. It is also important to be aware that there might be good reasons that people are not opening up. Participants should not be pressured to talk about anything they are not ready to talk about. Remember that it is always okay to pass.

Following are some questions or prompts that might open up the dialog:

- I’m not hearing anyone talk about the issues folks raised in the pre-meetings. Is this what the group wants?
- Restate the purpose of the circle as stated in the Request and ask – Are we getting at the purpose of this circle?
- What is unspoken in the group that blocks good relationships or possible success?
- What is the unspoken tension in the room?

You can also try taking a break and checking in with the people who expressed concerns in pre-meetings that are not being voiced in the circle.

Another strategy is to shift from the difficult topic to a different approach with a question such as:

- If you could change one thing in your job what would that be?
- Or a storytelling question (see Appendix 1) that reminds people of common ground

Or take a break and get people laughing through a physical game and then return to circle.

People may be reluctant to speak honestly about the issues because of fear. If that is the case you may need to adjourn the circle and do further preparation to increase the sense of safety or bring in additional people who create a greater sense of safety.

Suspending the talking piece – In the problem solving or agreement part of the circle it may be useful to suspend the talking piece and allow brainstorming or informal dialog among participants. After a period without the talking piece it is important to use it again to make sure all voices are heard. If one or more participants object to the use of the

talking piece, it is very important to do a round with the talking piece to find out how everyone else feels about using the talking piece. You do not want to respond immediately to the loudest voice(s), potentially disempowering quieter people who would still want the talking piece. If you stop using a talking piece altogether, it is no longer a circle. That could have significant implications for some participants who might have come expecting the safety and order of a talking piece and might not have chosen to participate in another kind of process. If you do completely stop using a talking piece it is important to inform the group that you are changing the process. Clearly state what process you are now using so that everyone is clear.

Re-centering in the middle of a circle - Developments in a circle can throw you off balance and trigger your anxiety, defensiveness or anger. It might be a result of escalation of tension among the participants or it might be the result of someone pushing one of your buttons. If that happens it is essential to take steps to re-center yourself. Your responsibility as a keeper requires you to be committed to the well-being of everyone in the circle. If you are off center it will be much more difficult for you to keep the circle safe for the participants. Self awareness is the first step. Pay attention to your own emotional state, your sense of equilibrium. Can you look with acceptance and generosity of spirit toward everyone in the circle? If not, what are you feeling and toward whom? Internally acknowledge the feelings, don't try to suppress them. Then take a deep breath and focus on your own centering tools which might include conscious deep breathing, silence, turning inward with self-empathy, prayer, signaling to your Co-Keeper that you need a moment, imagining roots growing from your feet into the ground that can draw up centering energy the way that plant roots draw up water from the ground. If you are extremely off balance you may wish to call a break and consult with your Co-Keeper on how to safely continue the circle. You and your Co-Keeper may adjust your plan for sharing responsibilities to accommodate your struggle with staying centered. You may find it helpful to repeat a phrase over and over in your mind that helps you to release your anxiety, defensiveness or anger. Here are some possibilities:

- *It's not about me.*
- *It's not my job to fix this for the group. It's my job to sit with the discomfort and not withdraw or lash out.*
- *The circle can hold emotions and tension.*
- *Conflict is an opportunity to understand myself and others better.*

Another helpful technique for re-centering is to have a small stone or other object that you carry in your pocket for the purpose of reconnecting you to your best self when you are off center. When you become aware of being off-balance you can reach in and hold the object reminding yourself that your center is still there. Or you may notice where you are holding tension in your body. As you invite your body to release that tension you will move back toward your center. Sometimes it may be appropriate to acknowledge to the circle that you are struggling with your own feelings about something that came up in the circle. Acknowledging your own humanity and vulnerability can be a powerful way to build trust, and the process of admitting that you feel off center may help you move back toward your center.

-----  
Steps to re-centering in the middle of a circle:



Self awareness - recognize when you are no longer centered.

Hold a strong intention to return to center.

Develop a personal strategy that you use over and over so that it becomes a habit you can access under pressure.

---

Practicing all three of these steps outside of circle with co-workers or family will increase your ability to re-center quickly in a circle.

Preparation and follow up are also useful. Think ahead of time about how you would like to respond if you get off-center. You will then be more likely to be able to respond constructively. After an experience of getting off center spend time with a support person or mentor who can help you debrief that experience and learn from it.

Being human - You may find that when you keep circles, you get nervous about how it will go, and about the need to be perfect. It is okay to ask for help from the circle. It is okay to not always get it 'right.' It is more important to make it safe enough for participants to let you know if it isn't working for them. That requires humility and openness to feedback. The circle is a very strong container if it is constructed on values. It is strong enough to hold mistakes or uncertainty. This is not about the keepers having all the answers; it is, rather, about the circle and its members all making a good faith effort to work through the issues in way that is consistent with the values of the process.

## **Agreements in the Circle**

If the Circle is making agreements those agreements are made by consensus. Consensus in the Circle is defined as "everyone can live with the decision." It does not require that everyone be enthusiastic, but does require that everyone in the Circle can support the decision. Any agreement should include some method of monitoring whether the agreement is working and a plan for responding to failure of the agreement. Generally, the best response to any failure is coming back to circle together to discuss any problems with the agreement. It is important that any agreements are recorded in some way. Lack of clarity about who is going to do what or what behavior will change can lead to frustration and disillusionment with the process. It is very important that everyone is clear about expectations after the circle. Written agreements are often the best way to achieve the necessary level of clarity and understanding by all parties.

## **Combining Circle with Other Formats**

Circles can be used with many other forms of dialog. Some facilitators trained in other processes combine circle with mediation techniques or with conferencing techniques. In combining circles with other techniques it is effective to surround the other dialog with circle. Begin by establishing the circle with opening, check-in and some dialog with the talking piece. You can then suspend the talking piece for open dialog or facilitator-directed dialog. After a period of open dialog resume the use of the talking piece in circle

to share reactions to what has come up in the open dialog. Also use the talking piece for a final closing round

In general in a circle the talking piece can be suspended to allow a spontaneous form of interaction for a period of time – for instance a brainstorming session. It is very important to resume the use of the talking piece after a period of open dialog to ensure the inclusion of all voices and to create a period of reflection after a period of stimulation. In most groups a small number of people will dominate open discussion. Additionally, **if the talking piece is suspended for open dialog for too long it will no longer be a circle** because the talking piece effectively engages everyone in process responsibility. Without the talking piece the facilitator must take more control of the dialog and that reduces the degree of self-responsibility of the members of the group.

### Differences Between Circle and Other Processes

Though circle can be combined with other processes the circle has several unique characteristics that distinguish circle from other processes.

Circle	Conferencing
Talking piece regulates the dialog	Facilitator directs the dialog – particularly in the early stages
Explicit discussion of values before discussing issues	No discussion of values
Group creation of guidelines	Facilitator provides ground rules and asks group for additions
Do not jump directly to the issues	Process goes directly to the participants to identify the issues
Deliberate marking of the space as a space apart through opening and closing ceremony	No use of ceremony but rather opening and closing consistent with pre-meetings
Facilitator is also a participant	Facilitator does not participate as a stakeholder

The circle commitment to relationship building before discussion of the core issue is a very important part of the circle process. Circles deliberately delay the dialog about the contentious issues until the group has done some work on relationship building. An introduction round with a question inviting people to share something about themselves, the creation of circle values and guidelines, and a storytelling round on a topic tangentially related to the key issue precede the discussion of the difficult issues that are the focus of the circle. These parts of the circle generate a deeper awareness within the circle of how their human journeys have generated similar experiences, expectations, fears, dreams and hopes. These opening parts of the circle also present participants to one another in unexpected ways, gently challenging assumptions they may have made about one another. Creating guidelines together provides an opportunity for the group to experience finding common ground in spite of serious differences. A circle intentionally does **not** “get right to the issues.” Taking time to create a sense of shared space and connection in the group increases the level of emotional safety which allows deeper truth telling. It also promotes awareness of the humanity of all participants.