

Circle

Overview

For as long as humankind has been around, the circle has surely been with us. Human beings have naturally been gathering in circle, around the fire, sometimes in deep conversation, sometimes in the quiet space of simply being together. At its most essential level, the circle is a form that allows a group of people to slow down, practice deep listening, and truly think together. When practiced fully, it can be an embodiment of the root of the word dialogue: “meaning flowing through”.

“Council” is another word, which expresses the promise of the circle. Imagine a circle of elders, passing a talking piece around one by one. Everyone’s attention is on the person currently holding the piece, sharing his or her thoughts, perspectives, and wisdom. Each person’s voice is valued and honoured. Long pauses of silence are an accepted part of the conversation.

People can meet in a circle as a once-off gathering, or coming together regularly over periods ranging from a few months to several years. In both these forms, and everything in between, the circle is in recent years making something of a comeback. From business executives in corporate boardrooms to community organizers in rural hinterlands, people are re-connecting with the value of sitting in circle.

Many of the processes described in this collection make use of chairs set up in a circle because it is generally the most suitable configuration for a dialogue. This section, however, looks specifically at Circle as a process in its own right, not only as a physical set up. We draw here on the guidelines developed by Christina Baldwin of PeerSpirit. Inspired by her exploration of Native American traditions, Christina wrote a book entitled “Calling the Circle”, which has made a major contribution to re-introducing circle process and developing a set of practices that can help us to facilitate meaningful circle dialogues. These guidelines can be used in their entirety or held more lightly.

Three principles of circle

Three principles help shape a circle. They are:

- **Leadership rotates** among all circle members. The circle is not a leaderless gathering - it is an *all leader* gathering.
- **Responsibility is shared** for the quality of experience.
- People **place ultimate reliance on inspiration** (or spirit), rather than on any personal agenda. There is a higher purpose at the centre of every circle.

Intention

As with most of the tools and processes of good dialogue, the starting point is with the purpose and intention. The intention will determine who should be invited to join, when, where and for how long they will meet, as well as what questions they will focus on.

The clearer the intention and the stronger the commitment to it, the stronger the circle. There are leadership circles, where people gather to support each other in their respective leadership practice. There are also circles that come together to solve a specific challenge such as improving a programme in an organization, or working together to make a neighbourhood more safe. It could be a group of workers coming together in circle with management to find the best way to deal with a need to retrench people, or even a group of homeless people joining members of a local church congregation to together come up with the best ways to support the homeless.

Sometimes a circle is more simply a tool used in a larger process during the course of a workshop, or as a weekly or monthly meeting in an organization, or community. In this case the intention is more informal – to share expectations, to connect with how each other is doing, and to surface and address any concerns or needs people may have.

The host

Although leadership is fully shared in circle, there will always be a host for the particular circle. Often the host is also the caller of the circle, but where a circle meets continuously over a longer period of time, the host role can change from circle meeting to circle meeting.

The host will ensure that the circle flows through its main phases and that the intention is at the centre of the dialogue. The host is often also responsible, with the “guardian” (see below), for the actual physical space. Special attention is paid to the physical centre of the circle – a colorful rug, some meaningful symbols or objects, and/or a plant may mark the centre of the circle and often represent the collective intention. This paying attention to the centre of a circle, brings with it a sense of the sacred, when people gather together around it. Something out of the ordinary is being invited in.

The Guardian

The Guardian is the person who pays special attention to the energy of the group, and that the group is not straying from the intention. The Guardian may interrupt during the course of the circle to suggest a break or a moment of silence.

Flow of a typical circle

Welcome. The welcome helps the group shift into circle space. A good welcome can be a poem, a moment of quiet, or a piece of music to help people fully arrive, and to become present to each other and their circle.

Check-in. One thing that distinguishes a circle from many other ways of coming together is the importance placed on bringing each voice into the room. The circle therefore begins with a check-in where each person has a chance to speak to how they are feeling, as well as sharing their expectations for the meeting that day. The host may pose a specific question for each person to respond to in the check-in. It is also not unusual to invite participants to place an object representing their hope for the circle in the centre, sharing a little about the object as they do so. The result is a meaningful visual representation of the group’s collective hopes in the center.

Agreements. When any circle gathers, its members need to formulate guidelines or agreements on how they wish to be together. This is an important part of shared leadership, and everyone taking responsibility for their time together. An example of commonly used agreements of circle are:

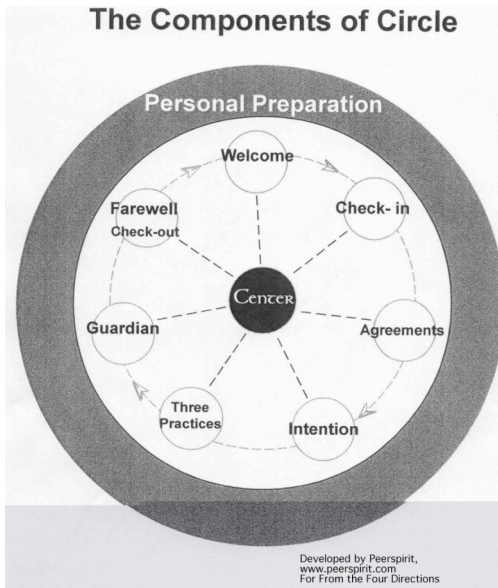
- Listen without judgment
- Offer what you can and ask for what you need
- Confidentiality – whatever is said in circle, stays in circle
- Silence is also a part of the conversation

Farewell/Check-out

At the end of a circle, similar to the check-in at the beginning, there is now a check-out for people to share where they are at. The focus of the check-out can be as diverse as each circle. It can be on what people have learned, how they are feeling about what transpired, or what they are committing to do moving forward from the circle. *Every* participant usually speaks in the check-ins or check-outs unless they explicitly choose not to.

Forms of Council

The circle is well known for the use of the talking piece. The talking piece is passed around the circle, with the person holding it being the only one to talk. The talking piece can be anything – an object from nature, a photograph, a pen, or even a cellphone. Some people think circle is only about working with talking piece council, but this is just one tool of the circle. Often the check-in is done with a talking piece, but then people can move into talking without it.



This is called *conversation council*, where anyone who has something to say speaks. When people have been using circle for a while, even in conversation council, the practice is ingrained to not interrupt someone, and to let each person finish before a new person begins.

Sometimes this conversation does speed up a little too much, and the centre – or calm – is lost. This is where the Guardian, or anyone who feels the need, can call the circle into reflection, or silent council, where everyone is silent for a while, letting things settle, before continuing either with the talking piece or in conversation council.

Three Practices

Essentially the circle is a space for speaking and listening, reflecting together and building common meaning. Three practices have been clarified, which can be useful to help people come into a higher quality of attention:

- Speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
- Listen with attention: respectful of the learning process all members of the group.
- Tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our contributions.

Applications

As mentioned earlier, the Circle is the most fundamental form of human organising, and in that sense, it is of course used all over the world, and has been for millennia. Christina Baldwin's work in particular also has quite a global reach. She has done trainings in Europe, North America, and Africa, and frequently emails out "Peer Spirit Tales" of how the circle is being used in different settings. An initiative launched in collaboration with the Berkana Institute, called "From the Four Directions" led to the launching of numerous leadership circles in North America, Europe, and, to a lesser degree, beyond.

The Circle is good for:

- Enabling a group to connect more intimately
- Creating equality among people who are at different levels in a group, organization or community – giving equal value to each person, and requiring everyone to participate
- Slowing people down and allowing them to think together

There is a lot of power in using the circle for a group meeting over a period of time, but it is also valuable to bring depth to a process or workshop by including circle check-ins and reflections during the course of the gathering.

Case Example – Kufunda Village

At Kufunda Village – a learning centre focusing on rural community development in Zimbabwe – the circle has become a core part of the work with communities as well as the way the centre itself is run. Every time the centre does its evaluations of its programmes, or of the work in the communities themselves, the circle comes up as a key factor of success. People seem to connect fully with it, perhaps because it is a part of the traditional culture.

“The circle – we were brought up there. Round the fire was where conversation took place. Every evening we would sit around the fire, and talk.” – Silas, Kufunda Village

At its simplest, there is a daily morning circle during community programmes in which each person checks in with how they are feeling around the programme, key learnings that survived the night and hopes and expectations for the day. The effect of using the circle with rural community organisers is that, where it might typically have been primarily adult men who would contribute, here everyone speaks. Slowly but surely, they build the confidence and naturalness of each person to contribute fully to everything that is done together. At the end of several programmes, men express their surprise at how much they have been able to learn in honest conversation with women (in the Shona system women and men often confer separately), or the elders from youth. The circle is taken back home to the communities that Kufunda works with, and it has become a natural way of meeting for all of the partner communities, allowing for the voice of the youth and the Chief alike to be expressed.

At Kufunda, a monthly team retreat day, where circle is used a lot (though not only) brings the team together in a more intimate way, giving space for people to express and work through concerns, needs or new ideas that may not make their way to the group during daily business.

Each team at Kufunda, meeting weekly, begin and end all their meetings with a talking piece check in, and check out. It means that people don't dive straight into business, but allow themselves to arrive and connect with each other, before getting into work. The check-out usually allows for reflection on how people are feeling about what was covered or decided. In times when the team struggles with misunderstandings, dedicated circle work has been invaluable in clearing the air – through a practice of truth-telling, choosing to listen without interrupting and jumping to defense. These are all aspects which the circle help promote.

The following list is a reflection on what the circle means both to Kufunda's employees and community partners from a series of evaluations done.

- The circle brings a sense of belonging
- Everyone contributes
- Everyone is a leader
- People speak from the heart
- Silence is ok
- It takes you out of your comfort zone
- It disrupts hierarchy
- It connects people
- It is intimidating
- It is liberating
- Everybody's voice is heard
- It is effective in conflict
- The circle is regulated by guidelines created by the group
- It fosters equality

Another example of a powerful use of circle is in the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Essential to the AA model are weekly meetings of alcoholics to be in dialogue and reflection together,

bearing witness to each person's challenges and progress. At these meetings people can ask for help with personal problems in staying sober, and they get this help from the experience and support of others like them. There is no hierarchy, but it is rather a place to create a community of support for people who all share a desire to stop drinking and stay sober. It is a place where people can show up as who they are, letting their masks down, and not needing to hide their fear.

There are open and closed AA meetings. The closed meetings are the ones that most resemble circle as we've described it here. AA is sometimes ridiculed by those distant from it, but in reality, it is a very effective and creative organisation. The relationships and capacities people build at AA often turn out to be lifelong and relevant in a much broader range of situations.

Commentary

In our experience, up to 30 people (max 35) can be in a circle together. With 8-15 people one is able to go much deeper. It can also be used in larger processes, breaking the group into several circles. For this it does need someone familiar with the basics of circle to facilitate each group initially.

Another variation if the group is large can be to use the "fishbowl", or what is known as "Samoan Circles". Here, participants are divided between an inner circle and an outer circle, with only the inner circle speaking and the outer circle listening. The inner circle can either be representative of the whole group, or of a sub-grouping, and sometimes it is set up so that people can move in between the inner and outer circles. This process is particularly useful when issues are controversial, or if the group is large.

For many who are not used to the circle, the slowness of the conversation and thinking can be frustrating. With time most people learn to value and appreciate the gifts of slowing down together, to really listen to each other. Generally, people who tend to be less vocal and less powerful will appreciate the circle immensely because they are given the space to speak, while those who are used to dominating a conversation will be more frustrated.

It's worth noting that Social Science research has actually been done to show that the first person to speak can have a large influence on what is said and the direction the conversation takes. The circle seems particularly prone to this dynamic. This can be useful, but it can also be problematic. The way around it is to give people time to reflect in silence and collect their own thoughts before people start to speak. In general, the host should be aware that while the circle has a great equalising influence on a group, informal power dynamics still exist, and can influence the conversation.

Finally, there are rituals connected to some circle practitioners, which can be off-putting to some. The circle can be used in as ceremonial or as bare-bones a way as one wants.

Resources

Baldwin, Christina. *Calling the Circle*

<http://www.peerspirit.com>

<http://www.fromthefourdirections.org>