

## ACTIVITY: CIRCLES AS A WAY TO CREATE GRACIOUS SPACE

Circles are an alternative process of communication, a way of being and a form of gathering that creates individual and collective empowerment through trust, good will, generosity, and reciprocity. In short, circles create and function in the context of Gracious Space. Circles derive from traditional discussion and healing practices of the first nations in Canada and the southwestern United States. They achieve their effectiveness through a gentle invitation to participants to change their relationship with themselves, their community, and the wider universe. Roca, in Chelsea, Massachusetts, brought circles to the KLCC II community. Since then, all of the other sites have widely used and appreciated the process.

The space circles create is sacred. It is a space in which participants intentionally lift barriers between themselves and thus open fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Circles create this sacred space via a process that includes introductions, building trust, discussing issues, and determining solutions.

This process brings people together in ways that allow them to see one another as human beings and to talk about what matters; healing, relationship building, and community building are inevitable outcomes. Roca had a lot of success using circles as a mediation tool, but you can adapt the circles process to serve your community's unique needs; one of the beauties of circles is that they can serve so many purposes.

Although it is common for communities to tailor circles to their own needs, all circles share essential features that ground their theory of communication:

- Everyone in the circle is equal and has equal opportunity to speak.
- Decisions are made by consensus.
- Everyone agrees to abide by the guidelines established by the group and based on shared values.

## UNDERSTANDING CIRCLES

Circles can be an abstract and difficult concept if you've never worked with them before. Here's some information we hope will give you a better understanding of circles – their values and principles, structures, and types.

### Values and Principles

Although each circle develops its own values and principles, all circles generally...

- Are designed by those who use them;
- Are guided by a shared vision;
- Call participants to act on their personal values;
- Include all interests and are accessible to all;
- Offer everyone an equal and voluntary opportunity to participate;
- Take a holistic approach to wellbeing that accounts for the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual;

- Maintain respect for all;
- Encourage exploring instead of conquering differences; and
- Invite accountability to others and to the process.

## Structures

The structure of circles provides gentle, highly effective support to groups that seek to stay on course with the values and principles they have established for their circle. Key structures that define circles are...

- The **meeting space**. This is a circle's most visible structure. Participants sit in a circle, the center of which may contain symbolic objects that help remind participants of shared values or may relate to the purpose of that particular circle. It is sometimes helpful to include such objects as a focal point; however, it's not necessary. You may choose to keep the center empty.
- A **talking piece**, used as a way to ensure respect between speakers and listeners. Participants pass the talking piece from person to person within the circle; only the person holding the piece may speak.
- A **"keeper"** of the circle who guides the participants and creates and holds the circle as a unique and safe space. Keepers are qualified to lead a circle if they have experienced circles themselves or they have undergone training in the process. Keepers will often self-identify; they also may be recruited by those who will be involved in the circle.
- **Ceremony and ritual** to create safety and form.
- **Consensus decision-making**. This style of decision-making honors the values and principles of circles and helps participants to stay grounded in these principles. All needs are heard, and the group commits to addressing these needs in some manner.

## Types of Circles

There are many different types of circles. Each type of circle serves a different purpose.

- **Support circles** provide emotional or spiritual support to individuals.
- **Talking circles** create an open dialogue about specific topics.
- **Criminal justice circles** work in partnership with the criminal justice system and the community to address the harms caused by offenders and determine reparations to victims or communities.
- **Sentencing circles** may be in partnership with the criminal justice system and the community to determine individuals' punishments for wrongdoing.
- **Reentry circles** work in partnership with the criminal justice system and the community to support the reentry of an offender into the community.
- **School-based circles** may be used by teachers as a specific teaching style, or to address the climate in the classroom.
- **Domestic violence circles** address harm caused in the home.
- **Peacemaking circles** build relationships and promote peace within a community.
- **Healing circles** heal bonds that have been broken or create new bonds between individuals.

**OVERVIEW**

This activity guides you through the five phases of circles: grounding, deepening, exploring options, building consensus or a sense of unity, and closing. The circle process can serve as a way to overcome issues or disagreements, or it can serve simply to bring group members together in a safe space. We’ve left the directions fairly vague so that you can adapt them to fit the purpose of your circle.

**OBJECTIVES**

- To build trust among your group members
- To come to collective understandings on pressing issues
- If you’ve chosen to facilitate a specific type of circle (e.g., peacemaking), your group will have identified another, more particular objective

**TIME REQUIRED**

Circles can take as much time as you need or have to offer. Depending on the size of your group and the issue your circle addresses, count on at least 45 minutes. We recommend that you plan for extra time, because the discussion, depending on its complexity and depth, may very well continue far past your allotted time.

Circles also require a fair amount of preparation time. Before the circle, you need to determine its goal. Talk with group members about their issues, concerns, and needs. You then need to identify who specifically (if not your entire group) needs to be present to discuss the identified issue. Another aspect of preparation is logistical coordination; you need to gather the materials, organize a time and place, and arrange for refreshments.

**SUPPLIES**

Circles require few props (a “talking piece,” a center piece – one or more objects placed in the center to symbolically hold present your group’s shared values and purpose, and possibly a flip chart and markers to record your guidelines). You’ll also need a flip chart, markers, and materials for the opening and closing ceremonies. .

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
<b>Step 1: Setting the context</b>	3 min	<p>Welcome your group to the circle. Begin the circle by sharing some general information about circles. Say, “Circles are an alternative form of communication that derive from traditional Native American healing practices. Circles create a sacred space; you should feel comfortable to share your thoughts and opinions freely. There are very few real rules for circles – only those we create ourselves. There are, however, a couple of things that are very important to remember. Only one person may speak at a time, and that person is the person holding the talking piece. The other thing to remember is that we all listen to and respect whoever is talking.”</p> <p>In explaining circles to your group, feel free to include any information from the <b>Understanding Circles</b> guide that you feel is helpful.</p>	<p>Flip chart</p> <p>Markers</p>

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WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
<p><b>Step 1: Setting the context (cont.)</b></p>		<p>Clearly state for your group the goal of your circle. Write it for all to see on a flip chart. You may want to ask participants if they have any other goals for the circle, but this step isn't always necessary because identifying a goal is part of preparation for circle.</p> <p>Before you begin the next step, be sure to acknowledge the volunteers who have helped make the circle happen.</p>	
<p><b>Step 2: Grounding – opening ceremony</b></p>	<p>5 min.</p>	<p>Formally begin your circle with an opening ceremony. The specifics of the opening ceremony will differ for each group, but many opening ceremonies include meditative music, the reading of a poem, or the singing of a song. Burning sage or incense is another common feature of opening ceremonies. (Usually, groups put the sage or incense in the center of the circle or pass it from participant to participant, using a feather to swirl the smoke and allowing participants to symbolically cleanse themselves of negative energies and prepare for sharing deeper emotions.)</p> <p>Whatever you choose, keep in mind that the goal of the opening ceremony is to ease the transition from the outer world into the reflective circle space.</p>	
<p><b>Step 3: Grounding – introductions and guidelines</b></p>	<p>10 min</p>	<p>Give the talking piece to a participant to begin the first round of sharing. Pass the talking piece around the circle. When it is their turn to share, have participants introduce themselves by name and explain how they feel, why they came to circle, and what they hope to achieve in circle.</p> <p>If this is a new group, have participants develop guidelines for how they want to be while in circle (e.g., respect all opinions, confidentiality, etc.). Using the talking piece, ask for suggestions from the group. Record the suggestions on flip chart paper for all to read. If the circle is ongoing, review the guidelines you've already established and invite the group to add any additional guidelines if necessary.</p> <p>Take a complete round of the circle to indicate that each person supports the guidelines.</p> <p>Remember, the guidelines are a "living document" and can be revised at any time.</p>	<p>Flip chart Markers</p>
<p><b>Step 4: Grounding – storytelling round</b></p>	<p>Will vary for each group</p>	<p>Storytelling is a powerful way to move beyond masks and appearances and to develop a better understanding of one another. If the purpose of the circle involves a difficult issue, it may be useful to have a storytelling round. Invite participants to share a personal experience related to the issue (perhaps in an indirect way).</p>	

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WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
<b>Step 4: Grounding – story-telling round (cont.)</b>		<p>Be sure to acknowledge everyone present in the circle. It takes courage and commitment to participate in a circle, and especially to share personal stories.</p> <p>After everyone has shared a story, summarize what you’ve all just experienced in phase one and restate the purpose of your circle. Use this time to further set the tone of the circle and to refine its purpose.</p>	
<b>Step 5: Deepening</b>	Will vary for each group	<p>Next, you may move the circle into a deepening round of dialogue. This round gets to the heart of why you called the circle. You can do this by asking participants for an expression of needs and interests (in the case of a conflict circle) or to share memories and grief (in the case of a healing circle). If small-group activities or paired sharing feels appropriate for your circle, it can be used here, but always come back to sharing in the full circle.</p>	
<b>Step 6: Promoting healing and exploring options</b>	Will vary for each group	<p>This next round of the circle expands its focus from what’s gone wrong or what’s hurting to what can be done to make things right and promote positive change. You can do this in different ways, depending on the tone your circle has taken. In many circles, especially those focused on healing, listening may be what’s most needed. Passing the talking piece from person to person gives participants a chance to tell their story and have it received deeply. In other circles, you may want to focus on discussions that explore options, to break through the sensation that participants are stuck in a painful experience or self-destructive way of life.</p>	
<b>Step 7: Building consensus or a sense of unity</b>	Will vary for each group	<p>Some circles, such as those involved in healing or understanding, don’t require decision-making, but many circles do require decision-making and conflict resolution. If your circle requires decision-making, you’ll need to build consensus by building on each circle participant’s input. The challenge is to weave the contributions of each participant together into a decision or solution all can agree upon.</p> <p>If your group needs to reach a consensus, tell them, “Consensus is an agreement among all of us that we’re all going to ‘live with the outcome’ – we’re going to accept a decision or course of action because it promises the best for everyone given the circumstances. To do this, we’re all going to need to be patient, creative, candid about our interests and concerns, and willing to think outside the box. We’re going to have to set aside our personal agendas and fixed notions about outcomes so that something larger than any one person’s preconceived ideas can emerge. We’re going to need dialogue, listening, and honesty.”</p>	

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WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
<b>Step 7: Building consensus or a sense of unity (cont.)</b>		<p>Through dialogue, help participants identify areas of disagreement and give them serious consideration. Use this fuller awareness of differences to work toward final decisions that are inclusive, and thus stronger.</p> <p>Don't be alarmed if reaching a decision by consensus takes a long time. In fact, decision-making by consensus often takes much longer than other decision-making methods, such as voting. You can test whether you've achieved consensus by using the <b>Consensus Level System</b>. Go around the circle and ask each participant to state his or her level of consensus. Do this until your group reaches a full consensus.</p>	
<b>Step 8: Closing</b>	10 min	All circles end with a closing ceremony. Much like the opening ceremony, the closing ceremony facilitates transition. This time, however, the transition is from the reflective circle back to the outer world. Design your closing ceremony to help participants feel centered and a sense of closure. Many closing ceremonies include a poem, song, or meditative music. Consider asking one of the participants (in advance) to offer the closing.	Closing ceremony materials
<b>Step 9: Follow-up</b>	Will vary for each group	Even though this step technically takes place well after the circle has dispersed, follow-up is one of the most important stages in the circle process. If you reached an agreement in your circle, make sure people are held accountable to the agreement. If you shared emotions, follow up with individuals to see how they're doing and make sure they're getting the support they need.	

## CONSENSUS LEVEL SYSTEM

The consensus level system involves six levels of consensus, with 1 being the strongest level of agreement and 6 being an absence of any sense of unity. Consensus is achieved when each participant chooses a consensus level of 4 or lower. If any member chooses a level 5 or 6, you have not achieved consensus. Be sure to address issues that are raised by participants who are at levels 4 and higher. If you cannot address these concerns immediately, create a process for addressing these concerns – perhaps a future circle.

### Consensus Levels

1. I can say an unqualified “yes” to the proposed decision. I am satisfied that the decision is an expression of the wisdom of the group.
2. I find the proposed decision perfectly acceptable.
3. I can live with the proposed decision; I’m not especially enthusiastic about it.
4. I do not fully agree with the decision and need to register my view about why. However, I do not choose to block the decision. I am willing to support the decision because I trust the wisdom of the group. *(Group finds a way to address remaining issues.)*
5. I do not agree with the proposed decision and feel the need to stand in the way of this decision being accepted. *(Group finds a way to address remaining issues.)*
6. I feel that we have no clear sense of unity in the group. We need to do more work before consensus can be reached. *(Group finds a way to address remaining issues.)*

## TIPS ON KEEPING CIRCLE

### Setting the Tone

You'll want to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for those who participate in a circle.

- Greet everyone warmly.
- In rounds that involve expressing deeper feelings, you may want to go first to show that it's safe to be vulnerable. In rounds that involve expressing views or opinions, you may want to speak last to lend balance at the end by expressing respect for all sides.
- Strive to convey an atmosphere that's open, calm, unhurried, reflective, respectful of differing views, and appreciative of each person's efforts.

### Building Trust, Creating a Safe Place

- Create strong openings and closings;
- Use the talking piece;
- Speak from the heart;
- Speak with respect;
- Listen with respect;
- Remain in the circle;
- Emphasize that all participants are equal;
- Emphasize confidentiality;
- Establish guidelines;
- Create a shared set of core values for guiding the community's circle work;
- Practice acceptance;
- Use a consensus approach;
- Use ceremony and ritual;
- Practice honesty; and
- Practice humility.

### Balancing Interests and Perspectives

- During circle preparation, try to ensure that all interests will be represented.
- During the circle gathering itself, make sure the dialogue is balanced.

### Protecting the Integrity of the Process

At times, circles will have explosive or emotionally draining conversations. Before, during, and after these intense moments, you can take various measures to maintain the circle's integrity.

- Be clear about the circle's values and guidelines;
- Model appropriate conduct;
- When needed, offer gentle reminders of values and guidelines;
- When appropriate, use humor;
- Speak privately with individuals during breaks, as appropriate; and
- Trust the circle to work through difficult situations.

## Regulating the Pace of the Circle

- If the participant holding the talking piece speaks at length *and* it appears that others are growing uneasy, you can intervene gently and ask that the piece be passed.
- Use breaks to help regulate the pace and to manage someone who is speaking at length.

## Maintaining Focus

- For the circle rounds, create questions that will help keep the focus;
- Take a holistic approach to the questions; and
- Be flexible – let the circle move where it needs to go.

## Participating as Yourself

- Although you are heading the circle, you are also a member of the group. Use your position with great respect and care.
- Do *not* try to maintain a detached, observer role;
- Engage in the circle process just like everyone else, stating your perceptions, expressing emotions, and sharing personal stories; and
- Speak from your own voice.

## Attending to Culture and Ethnic Concerns

The circle should reflect the community that it's in. Language should be geared toward the community. Know the culture(s) of your participants so that whatever you say or do will be viewed as respectful. If you don't know or aren't sure, ask.

## Using Ceremonies

Circle ceremonies move us to ways of being together that are different from what we are doing or feeling before. The ceremonies use inclusive, non-denominational, non-threatening rituals to help move people into the circle space and then out of it. Ceremonies promote a sense of community, of pulling together around shared visions, aims, and endeavors within the circle. Rituals need to be voluntary, and participants need to understand how they relate to shared principles and values. Rituals may be fun and relaxing, deeply moving, or used to help lighten things up.

## Using a Talking Piece

The talking piece helps create a respectful dialogue; participants speak only when they're holding it. The talking piece will be passed around the circle. When it reaches a participant, that person has an opportunity to speak, hold the talking piece in silence, or pass it on without comment. The talking piece creates the space for each person to contribute, and silence can be as powerful as words.

The talking piece carries with it a responsibility to honor the shared values of the circle and should be used in a respectful way. During a session, the talking piece always moves in the same direction around the circle. In the circle, the talking piece helps to engage everyone in taking responsibility for the success of the process. It removes dependence on key people and spreads leadership among all participants in the circle.

Examples of talking pieces can be feathers, rocks or stones, or anything that has a specific meaning for the community.