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CIRCLE PRACTICE

Many cultures, traditions, and organizations convene circles in various ways. The practice can be traced back to traditional ways of knowing in most Indigenous cultures and is an every-day occurrence common in peace-oriented cultures. Circles are a natural formation for humans to gather in conversationally, but a circle practice is about designing intentional ways of bringing people together.

Some purposes for convening circle might be: ceremonial, therapeutic, decision making, problem solving, impact exploration and conflict resolution. When circles become a normal part of organizational life, the community is more practiced at hearing one another and sharing openly.

The specifics and nuances of circle practice will vary among practitioners and contexts but the following aspects are common in most.

CHARACTERISTICS

- A clear purpose for discussion and intention for convening in this specific way
- People sit in a circle formation to have a dialogue
- A facilitator (vs. a meeting chair) who convenes, starts, and concludes the circle and encourages all to uphold the group agreements
- There are shared principles/norms/agreements/etiquette/traditions by which the circle is conducted that includes some process of turn taking

PRINCIPLES

- **Collectivity:** A collaborative process where multiple perspectives are shared and topics are explored together.
- **Relationality:** Seeing others as humans with equal value and recognizing that people experience life differently.
- **Respect:** Creating opportunity for every person to have a voice, to be heard, and to increase their compassion from hearing multiple voices.
- **Equity:** Structure that encourages information flow beyond and outside hierarchy.

AGREEMENTS

- Speaking honestly from the heart
- Listening from the heart
- Agreeing not to interrupt
- Agreeing to go in order (once order/direction is decided)
- Reserving the right to “pass”
- *Additional agreements/ground rules as the situation requires*

POSSIBLE FORMAT

- Opening
- Agreements reviewed
- Logistics reviewed (eg. The direction of sharing is chosen—clockwise, counter clockwise—or a typed order in the chat for a virtual meeting)
- Check-in round
- 1 or more rounds about the topic itself
- Check-out round
- Closing

Rounds are often initiated with a powerful invitation question that encourages participants to engage in a personal way without force.

SIT, SLOW THE CONVERSATION, TAKE TURNS

PREPARATION

The following questions can help you in preparing to convene a circle:

- What is our intention for gathering? What specific invitation question do we want people to share about in a round of dialogue?
- Who will facilitate?
- Who will attend? How will they be invited/prepared?
- When and where will we convene? How will we ensure enough time and space for good sharing? Who will arrange the space? How can we come up with a good enough arrangement if the ideal isn't possible?
- What power/privilege/discrepancies might exist in this community that we need to be explicit about? How will we care for each other in our differences?
- What are our group agreements? How will we uplift them when things get tense?
- Which direction/order will we go in?
- What follow-up is required after this conversation? How will we take action on what we have heard?

APPROPRIATE USAGE

How can circle practice relate to conflict?

Often what helps to unearth, clarify, and resolve a conflict is an understanding of various perspectives involved. A circle is a great way to get at a multitude of perspectives, especially when the conflict impacts community members not directly involved.

The physical set up of a circle also helps to diminish the ways we might use space to assert hierarchy (taking the head seat at a table) or to protect our vulnerabilities (sitting behind a desk) and brings people into a collaborative space with a shared goal. This is helpful in locating the problem outside of the individuals involved and rather one to be solved collaboratively.

Circles also take time in order for each participant to be heard and can therefore be an excellent way to slow down and breath space into a conflict that feels urgent or like it's escalating quickly.

When shouldn't someone convene a circle?

- Circles should not be performative. Circles are not a check box to be ticked, or a way to have a bad conversation but claim it was done in a good or decolonized way.
- Circles are best used when what is learned in the circle will be incorporated in subsequent action. If your outcome or decision is predetermined then a circle is not appropriate. While a facilitator is necessary to start/conclude/and hold up agreements, the facilitator is not a decision maker in a circle, but rather the holder of the process.
- A threshold for circle dialogue is that it be a topic that matters and has emotional resonance to those involved. Circles aren't usually helpful for solving technical problems or for providing updates (this is how a roundtable differs from a circle).
- Good circles involve people coming with willingness to listen and engage honestly and with a good heart. If all participants don't understand or agree on process and intention the value of the circle will be undermined.
- Circles require enough time for each party to share and be heard, so are not usually conducive to being done in time limited space. Rather than decide not to have a circle because you "don't have time" it may be worth asking "why aren't we making the time?"

How else can a non-Indigenous person convene a circle in a way that is culturally respectful?

- Acknowledge that circle practice comes from traditional ways of knowing. Appropriation would be to hold oneself as an expert rather than acknowledging the roots of an evolving practice.
- Explore in advance with circle participants the expectations and cultural significance circle has for them. Adjust the group agreements accordingly.
- Begin a circle with a sincere territory acknowledgement local to where you are gathered.
- Be mindful about selecting a talking piece. Talking pieces can serve a practical function of demonstrating whose turn it is, but they can also have cultural significance you may not be aware of. Be honest about your intentions with a talking piece and curious about how the piece you've selected may be perceived.

How do you encourage people to engage in circle if it's new or uncomfortable for them?

- Discuss why a collaborative conversation is important.
- Normalize that the first experiences might be uncomfortable – and that wanting to "get it right" is a perfectionistic tendency that we are looking to decolonize with this type of process.
- Share about your own fears and invite them to be curious about their fears (eg. What do you think is going to happen if we sit, slow the conversation, and take turns?).
- Comment on the importance of vulnerability: Notice how it feels to be vulnerable in even simple things like not positioning your body behind a table.

What are some of the other ways circle practice is being used on campus outside of First People's House?

- Leadership programming
- Team development work (eg. processing grief)
- Conflict resolution
- The School of Social work has been building circle practice into pedagogy, using it for: Approvals/Decisions, Hiring Committees, Student concern issues, Role Clarity