

LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL
Opening and Closing Circles



The Circle's Web

*Weren't we meant
To stand in circles
Feel the round
The curve
The energy inward
The momentum,
Next, across
The smiling eyes
Pick up the dangling word
Finish or help
Hold up, high five
Shoulder the sagging
Join hands
For grace
The glance of glee
The skip of laughter
The push of angst
The wave of mellow
Cradling the spell of memory.
Lynda Tredway, 1996*

Note: All protocols have multiple origins. The strength of a protocol is in the ability of facilitators or planners to adjust/revise for use in your context. <http://www.nsrfharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z> is a good source of multiple protocols for school, district, community and organizational use.

Overview

Circles draws on long time rituals of cultures and communities that provide space to open up fresh possibilities for connections, collaboration and understanding. Circles can hold the tensions and emotions that contribute to healing and can support people to use the collective energy to take action. The process is not about changing others, but rather acts an invitation to change one's relationship with oneself, to the community and to the wider universe. The result is trust, strong relationships, and the ability to work together to advance social justice in communities.

Outcome

To develop and hold relational trust and reciprocity by reflecting on self and use circle time to connect to reflections of others

Description

Circles tap into ancient practices and modern processes to create trust, goodwill, belonging, and reciprocity. They offer a way of being together that transforms relationships. Participants are seated in a circle focusing on the center where symbolic objects may be placed to remind participants of values shared among those in the circle. A talking piece is used as a way to ensure respect between speakers and listeners. The talking piece is passed from person to person within the circle and only the person holding the piece may speak. Two "keepers" of the circle are also identified. The keepers guide the participants and keep the circle as a safe space. While it is possible to have only one keeper, generally a team of two is preferable. Ceremony and ritual are used to create safety and form. Consensus decision-making is also important, as it honors the values and principles of peacemaking circles and helps participants to stay grounded in them.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Circles intend to build community by restoring relationships that have been injured by exclusion, inequity, harm or other divisions. To bring people together in healthy ways the process need to.

- **Create safety and trust** – Mistrust can be a logical survival strategy for people who have been unfairly treated by others. Creating safe space can allow trust to develop in a natural way.
- **Honor voice and hold stories sacred** – To tap the wisdom people hold, we need to hear their stories. When we treat these stories in a sacred manner, people will be more inclined to share what is most important to them.
- **Share power among people** – When people come together there is often a significant difference in the power they carry particularly when a participant has a formal position of leadership in the community or in an organization. Power needs to be held lightly so the value of each person can come forth. We need to affirm the dignity of everyone based on their humanity and not their title.

- **Support honest dialogue about important issues.** We need people to be able to talk about the most important issues facing the community. This requires moving past reluctance and opening up to honest dialogue.
- **Foster new relationships.** Sometimes groups will open up honest comments about issues and fail to work through the pain and dissonance that is surfaced. Community gatherings need to be able to work through difficult discomfort and pain in a way that comes out the other side into stronger, deeper connections and relationships among people.

Application/How it has been/can be used

Circles can be used for any important work between people. It is well established as a model for opening up deeper relationships and honest conversations in organizations. Circle process has been used to foster understanding between nurse practitioners and teenage parents; bring together faculty to form a Center for Mexican American studies; connect students, school board members, parents and teachers to improve local schools. Circles have also been used address inter-generational work, racism, violence, police-community relationships, and to provide alternatives within the justice system.

Resources

- Pranis, K., Wedge M., Stuart, B. *Peacemaking circles: from crime to community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. 2003.
- Pranis, K. and Zehr, H. *The little book of circles process: A New/Old approach to peacemaking*. Pennsylvania: Good Books Intercourse. 2005.
- Ruder, K. *The Collective Leadership Storybook: Weaving Strong Communities*. Seattle: Center for Ethical Leadership. 2010. pp. 123-129.

Implementation Steps (with timing)

In Community Learning Exchange we most often use circles as a way to **open and close** the gatherings. We will also use circles to go deeper into issues when it is important to hear all voices and perspectives to create collective understanding of issues.

For opening circles the process is:

- Gather in circle (usually seated with chairs in circle, but could be standing depending on cultural traditions of circle).
- Identify and use a **talking piece** that is meaningful to the purpose of this gathering.
- Circle keeper will welcome people and offer reading, poem, quote, or story to set the tone and bring good spirit into the gathering.
- Invite people to introduce themselves, say where they are from and answer a question to learn more of their story – e.g. what is a personal gift you bring to this gathering?
- Introduce the talking piece and explain a few key ground rules: Only person with talking piece speaks; go clockwise in a circle with each person speaking; speak from your heart; pass when it is your turn if you wish; listen with an open heart; hold back comments on what others say.

For closing circle the process is:

- Circle keeper will remind participants of the role of the talking piece and the significance of the particular talking piece being used.
- Introduce closing reflection question – e.g. What has moved you in our time together? What are you taking home from this gathering?
- Ask people to be conscious of the time needed to hear from everyone.
- Invite one person to do final closing reflection about this gathering (arrange this prior to starting the closing circle)
- Optional: Invite people to stand and do a final spirit reading.

End with appreciations and thanks to the hosts of the learning exchange.