

Peacemaking Circles

Format

Value of circle format for discussion, brainstorming or problem solving:

1. Shared leadership, equality - Placing everyone in a circle minimizes structural distinctions between "teacher" and "learner" and sets a tone of equal participation and equal capacity to teach and learn among all participants.
2. Visual contact among all participants at all times - In a circle no one is looking at anyone else's back. It is easier to listen and hear when there are direct sight and sound lines among participants.
3. Focus - The structure of the circle focuses attention on the participants and task of the circle and reduces distractions.
4. Connection - The circle links all participants with one another encouraging a sense of shared effort or common purpose.
5. Respect / accountability - Because everyone in a circle can see everyone else, disrespectful behavior such as side conversations or demeaning non-verbal actions are discouraged. If it happens it becomes obvious to everyone in the circle.
6. Input and participation from all - Use of the technique of going around the circle providing each person with a chance to speak ensures that everyone has an opportunity to be heard and reduces domination of discussion by a small number of people.
7. Inclusion - In a circle no one feels isolated or left out.

Advantages of the talking piece:

@ The use of the talking piece helps to manage discussion of very emotional issues. Emotions can be expressed without the emotions taking over the dialog. Because participants must wait for the talking piece to speak, they cannot respond without thinking. Because the talking piece must go around the full circle, it prevents two individuals from getting into a back and forth emotional exchange. If the words of one participant anger another, multiple members of the circle may address the issues raised before the talking piece reaches the angry participant, thus relieving the angry participant from a sense of needing to defend him/herself alone.

@ The talking piece creates space for the contributions of quiet people who might otherwise not assert themselves to claim room in the dialog. These people often have valuable insights which are lost in an open dialog process.

@ The talking piece spreads responsibility for peacemaking to all participants. In traditional mediation, participants expect the mediator to control the dialog. In the circle process the keeper does not interrupt the flow of the talking piece, thus every participant carries responsibility to address conflict which may be arising between some participants in the circle.

@ The talking piece promotes better listening. Participants listen better when they know that they will not have an opportunity to speak until the talking piece reaches them. In open dialog we often stop listening and begin formulating our response before a speaker is finished because we need to rush into an opening in the dialog.

@ The talking piece encourages the use of silence in the process.

@ The talking piece reinforces the principle of equality in the circle because it provides equal opportunity to all to participate and presumes equal capacity for contributions from all participants.

Role of the keeper:

@ Create an atmosphere of respect and safety for all.

@ Create a tone of hope and optimism for constructive solutions.

@ Guide the process to remain true to underlying values.

@ Articulate the progress and accomplishments of the circle as it proceeds.

@ Clarify unresolved issues to focus the circle's energy.

@ Participate as a community member.