

THISTLEDEW CIRCLES

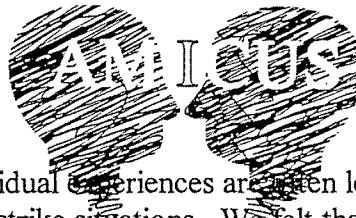
BACKGROUND AND PLANNING

AMICUS was requested by the Minnesota Department of Corrections and Thistledeew Camp administrators to be involved in helping the organization proactively cope with the stressors and tensions that resulted from the Minnesota State Workers strike this fall. Thistledeew Camp is a residential correction placement for adolescent boys in Northern Minnesota. Due to a variety of factors, such as; remoteness of facility, the relatively low turnover rate of personnel, and the lengthy history of the organization, the staff team is a close-knit group of individuals who take pride in the quality of services they provide to teenage boys. The events of the strike were, as expected, difficult for this agency as many people felt separated by alliances toward or against the union, and also felt that relationships were damaged due to behavior and verbal interactions during the heat of the moment. Thistledeew Camp administrators took a proactive stance by suggesting that a circle be called to get the issues out in the open, allow people to share their stories, create a safe place for feelings to be shared and listened to, express what is needed to move on, and to start the healing process.

Paula Schaefer, Female Planner at the MN DOC, along with Thistledeew Camp administrators, and myself worked to create a plan that would allow the circle process to be an opportunity to achieve the above stated goals while being cognizant of time constraints and the realities and nuances of supporting 45 individuals working through their individual experiences of grief, stress, or victimization, among a variety of potential responses to the strike. Our plan was to have a half-day circle to introduce the process and to set parameters for what can be done to help the agency through this time. This would serve as an opportunity to begin the healing process and to prepare individuals for the second circle, which would focus more on the emotional issues that are at the root of the tensions. A week after this first meeting we set aside an entire day for a second circle to deal with the core issues that individuals were struggling with. From the beginning, we acknowledged that these two sessions would only be the start of a likely long process, and that we as circle keepers were neither experts nor problem-solvers, but are present to be support people in guiding the agency through the process.

As circle keepers it was important for us to be cognizant of a variety of important issues that could contribute to the conceivably contentious environment involving returning to work following the strike. It is likely that most individuals, if not everyone would be experiencing some degree of stress and awkwardness in returning to work. The stress level may even be more acute due to the events of September 11, and the resultant security and economic realities that have scarred the nation. In addition, there would likely be a variety of experiences toward the strike due to individual choices made out of





personal necessity. These individual experiences are often lost in the “us versus them” mentality of alliances typical in strike situations. We felt that it would be beneficial for individuals to share their unique “stories” to help reestablish some of the relationship connections that were harmed to some degree by the strike. Also, we felt it was important to be prepared to respond to a wide range of intense expressions of emotions, which often fluctuate in post strike work environments.

FIRST CIRCLE

The first circle was held October 24, 2001. We spent substantial time framing the process and setting the stage for the work we would be doing together. We reiterated that we were not here to debate sides or to try to convince anyone that a particular position was more appropriate than another. This reminder would become a consistent theme as several individuals preferred to debate their position rather than discuss being accountable for their own actions and what they could do to help the team move through the process of healing.

To guide the circle we placed the program’s guiding principles and core values in the center to keep us grounded and to remind everyone of their commitment to help kids. This was important as the team created and voted on these guiding principles and core values, so they hold some weight within the work culture. We also asked everyone to imagine that a larger circle of students was encircling our own circle watching the adults role model mature problem solving and acting as a boundary and reminder of what is truly important to their purpose of working at Thistledeew.

We emphasized and role modeled the circle process as a safe place to share and hopefully heal, that this was different than a “staff meeting” or a “mediation session”. We did this by working to create a “sacred space” where individuals would be able to listen and speak from the heart, have the right to remain silent, commit to confidentiality, and to respect the talking piece by ensuring that the holder of the talking piece would be the only one speaking at the time. By working to create a sense of ceremony through opening and closing readings/meditations and other rituals, we emphasized the importance of creating a space that was conducive for this type of work. We also emphasized that the group was just as much responsible for co-facilitation as we were as circle keepers. It was our belief that if we spent significant time and energy frontloading the process we would hopefully nurture an environment in which people would over time become comfortable in being honest with themselves and others.

The first few rounds of the talking piece centered on introductions, “check ins”, and other light hearted questions designed to relax the group and to hopefully build some universality among participants. The next round asked circle members to share what they needed to feel safe through this process. This question was important to get people to think in general terms about what they need to feel safe, and also for other circle members to create an awareness of how their behavior could potentially impact others.

The next round consisted of an activity in which circle members were asked to record on an index card how the strike impacted them personally. As well, individuals were asked to write down if they believed if they were harmed by anyone during the





strike, and also if they knowingly inflicted harm on anyone. After they finished writing, they were asked to place their index cards in a safe place until we met again, and if they chose to do so they would then have an opportunity to share their reflections. This activity was designed so participants would reflect on their personal behavior, as well as explore the impact on self, family, and work relationships that occurred as a result of the strike. We wrapped up the first circle by asking participants to share what their hopes were for Thistledeew Camp and themselves in the next three months. We hoped that this exchange would end the session in a positive light and would get participants to be thinking of potential healing responses.

Overall, the tone of the first circle was positive despite the clear tension that existed among participants. It was clear that people wanted to maintain their positive work with kids, and that was the most important thing. However, there were conflicting views about how to move on after the strike due to deep-seated views on labor unions, individual responses to stress, and current level of anger. It appeared that some individuals were ready to get into difficult issues right away and that others were very worried about what could happen during this circle. Some participants were grateful that a circle was being held to address the issue and others claimed to not believe in the process and verbalized their belief that it was a waste of time. Despite the diversity of expectations toward the process, we believed that we were able to set the stage for the following circle.

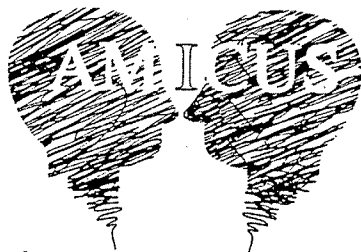
SECOND CIRCLE

The second circle was held October 30, 2001. Our plan for this circle was to maintain the safe space that the group created at the last session and to provide an opportunity for people to share their "impact statements" if they chose to do so. Since we had a full day to work the process we were prepared to be flexible to the emerging needs of the group.

After calling the circle with an opening reading, we reviewed what we had done last session emphasizing the program guiding principles and core values that were at the center of the circle. Again we asked the group to imagine a larger circle of clients around us that would hopefully keep the group focused on the big picture. The first pass of the talking piece consisted of a "check in" where participants were asked to share how they were doing in general terms and also how they felt about being back today. The next round centered on exploring what was the most stressful thing for individuals and their families during the strike. Both of these rounds took a substantial amount of time as group members spoke eloquently about their experience of stress during the strike, and also the residual stress as a result of actions that transpired during this time.

The next round was the group's chance to share their individual impact statement that they had written last week. This was an emotional round for many participants as they shared in detail how they believed they were impacted, how they were perceived to be harmed, and/or how they believe they may have harmed their co-workers through their





actions. Most participants took the opportunity to share their impact statement, while a small handful passed. It was our interpretation that this round fulfilled the goal of allowing people to share their "story" in a safe way, to vent what they felt needed to be said, and to ask questions of others to clarify previous events. We believed that the people who were emotionally ready to move on were able to take responsibility for their actions, start making amends and to begin the healing process with their peers. We believed that this round was a "break through" of sorts, as people spoke from the heart, were honest and real with their emotions, and shared compassion and hope.

At the next round we asked the circle to share what they needed to "move on". Since many people had made apologies during the last round, we encouraged people to make other amends or set plans to make amends during this round. People shared that they needed a variety of things to move on, including; time, patience, understanding, forgiveness, etc...After doing a good job of articulating what they needed to heal, we transitioned to having them make commitments about what they as individuals were committed to doing to help the program move forward and for the staff team to function in a safe and healthy manner. Again, most people were positive and hopeful and made strong commitments to helping the program through this time and to maintain the high quality programming Thistledeew Camp provides to adolescent boys.

FUTURE PLANNING

Overall, the circle keepers and Thistledeew Camp administrators were positive about the work that was started through these two circles. We acknowledge that individuals experience forgiveness on diverse timelines and fluctuating emotional/behavioral continuums, thus we were cognizant that this was the beginning of the process and comprehensive and attentive follow-up would be crucial. Program administrators are committed to attending to these needs and will utilize circles as needed to address issues as they arise. Paula and myself will also check in with the program to assess where the staff team is at, and to be available for continued support.

Again, I believe it is important to recognize the leadership of the program for taking a proactive stance in addressing this issue. I believe that this reflects their commitment to the circle process and Restorative Justice values. Since they regularly use circles in staff meetings and in their programming with kids, they have a solid system in place to safely express concerns and problem-solve.

AMICUS welcomed the opportunity to establish a relationship with Thistledeew Camp and offers its ongoing support to the program. The process was a good chance to support a DOC institution, while sharing the vision of Restorative Justice values and the circle process.

Matt Johnson
AMICUS, Girls Restorative Justice Program Coordinator

