

Essential Elements of Constructing the Talking Circle

Kay Pranis

The Circle is a structured dialog process that nurtures connections and empathy while honoring the uniqueness of each participant. The Circle can hold pain, joy, despair, hope, anger, love, fear and paradox. In the Circle each person has the opportunity to speak their truth but cannot assume the truth for anyone else. The Circle welcomes difficult emotions and difficult realities while maintaining a sense of positive possibilities. The Circle is deeply rooted in an understanding of profound interconnectedness as the nature of the universe.

The Circle keeper/facilitator uses the following elements to design the Circle and to create the space for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another and to seek a greater understanding of one another's perspective.

- **Seating of all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables)**
- **Opening ceremony**
- **Centerpiece**
- **Values/guidelines**
- **Talking piece**
- **Guiding questions**
- **Closing ceremony**

Seating of all participants in a circle – Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. That seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and be accountable to one another face to face. It also creates a sense of focus on a common interest without creating a sense of ‘sides’. A Circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. Removing tables is sometimes uncomfortable for people, but is important in creating a space apart from our usual way of discussing difficult issues. It increases accountability because all body language is obvious to everyone.

Opening ceremony – Circles use openings and closings to mark the Circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group. The clear marking of the beginning and end of the Circle is very important because the Circle invites participants to drop the ordinary masks and protections they may wear that create distance from their core self and the core self of others. Openings help participants to center themselves, bring themselves into full presence in the space, recognize interconnectedness, release unrelated distractions and be mindful of the values of the core self. Opening ceremonies may involve mindfulness practice, inspirational readings, movement, music or other activities.

Centerpiece – Circles use a centerpiece to create a focal point that supports speaking from the heart and listening from the heart. The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the

open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, a shared vision of the group. Centerpieces often emphasize inclusion by incorporating symbols of individual Circle members as well as cultures represented in the Circle.

Values - The space of the Circle is rooted in the values that represent who we want to be in our best self. To help us remember our best self the Circle engages in a conversation about values before doing work together. That is done through a pass of the talking piece inviting participants to name a value that is important to them in how we treat each other in the Circle. Those values are written on pieces of paper, index cards or small paper plates that are placed in the center of the Circle. In on-going groups those values are brought back each time the Circle meets.

Guidelines – Participants in a Circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion. The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the Circle dialog. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the Circle. They are not imposed on the participants but rather are adopted by consensus of the Circle.

Talking piece – Circles use a talking piece to regulate the dialog of the participants. The talking piece is passed from person to person around the rim of the Circle. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. It allows the holder to speak without interruption and allows the listeners to focus on listening and not be distracted by thinking about a response to the speaker. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection, and an unhurried pace. The talking piece is a powerful equalizer. It allows every participant an equal opportunity to speak and carries an implicit assumption that every participant has something important to offer the group. As it passes physically from hand to hand, the talking piece weaves a connecting thread among the members of the Circle. The talking piece reduces the control of the keeper/facilitator and consequently shares control of the process with all participants. Where possible the talking piece represents something important to the group. The more meaning the talking piece has (consistent with the values of Circle), the more powerful it is for engendering respect for the process and alignment with the core self. The Circle keeper may speak without the talking piece but avoids doing so as much as possible.

Guiding questions – Circles use a prompting question or theme at the beginning of each round of the talking piece to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the Circle. Every member of the Circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses. Questions are often designed to elicit the sharing of personal stories by the participants.

Closing ceremony - Closings acknowledge the efforts of the Circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Openings and closings are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness.

The role of the facilitator or keeper of the Circle is to assist the participants in creating a space where each can speak and listen from the heart. The keeper helps the Circle create the space and then monitors the quality of the space. The keeper is not an enforcer of Circle guidelines but the guardian of them. Every member of the Circle bears responsibility for the quality of the dialog. If the dialog becomes disrespectful the keeper invites the Circle to discuss what is happening and how to move toward a more respectful interaction.

Circles are never about persuasion. They are a process of exploring meaning from each perspective in the Circle. From that exploration we may find common ground or we may understand more clearly why another person sees something differently. The more diverse the perspectives in a Circle the richer the dialog and the opportunity for new insights. The keeper does not control this process but helps the Circle work through uncomfortable moments by maintaining the use of the talking piece going in order around the Circle and by engaging the Circle in reflection on its own process when needed.

The Circle keeper is a participant and can speak in turn in the Circle. Sometimes the keeper speaks first in a round to model the kind of response being invited or to model the sharing of personal stories. At other times the keeper speaks last in a round to reduce the risk of the keeper influencing the dialog inappropriately. The keeper or facilitator of the Circle may on rare occasions, such as calling a break, speak without the talking piece but only for process reasons, never to comment on content.

The Circle keeper attempts to hold an attitude of compassion and caring for every member of the Circle regardless of behavior. The Circle keeper's respectful relationship with every participant is essential to the creation of a safe space.

Talking Circles are used for building or strengthening relationships, teaching and learning, exploring different perspectives on a topic, developing social-emotional literacy, healing for loss or trauma, coordinating teamwork or collective action and engaging respectful dialog on difficult issues.

Tips for Keepers

Role of the Keeper in a circle - The keeper assists the group in creating and maintaining a collective space in which each participant feels safe to speak honestly and openly without disrespecting anyone else. The keeper monitors the quality of the collective space and stimulates the reflections of the group through questions or topic suggestions. The keeper does not control the issues raised by the group or try to move the group toward a particular outcome. The keeper's role is to initiate a space that is respectful to everyone, and to engage participants in sharing responsibility for the space and for their collective work. The keeper is not an enforcer of the group guidelines. The responsibility for addressing problems with the guidelines belongs to the entire circle. The keeper is in a relationship of caring about the well-being of every member of the circle and is a participant in the circle.

Keeper role:

- Maintain a commitment to the well-being of everyone in the circle throughout the process,
 - Help the group create a respectful space,
 - Monitor the quality of the space as the circle proceeds,
 - Draw the group's attention to any problems with the quality of the space,
 - Invite the group to figure out how to improve the quality of the space,
 - Support and validate efforts of individuals and the group during the process,
 - Use questions and prompts that help participants access their own wisdom,
 - Participate in the circle,
 - Maintain a sense of positive human potential.
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Designing effective questions – The shape of the question has enormous impact on the shape of responses. It is worth taking time to frame questions carefully. Effective questions are framed to:

- invite participants to share stories from their lives (Share an experience when you . . .)
- invite reflection and stimulate new perspectives,
- carry a sense of curiosity,
- explore new ground or broader implications,
- invite personal connection to underlying themes,
- invite people to look inside rather than outside for guidance,
- seek meaning beneath words or actions,
- invite recognition of strengths or assets as well as the difficulties,
- transition participants from the discussion of difficult or painful events into discussion of what can be done now to make things better,
- engage heart and spirit, as well as the mind.

Effective questions are open-ended. They do not have obvious answers. As a facilitator it is important that you convey curiosity with the questions you ask. Your questions should convey a

sense of openness and willingness to learn from the answers of the participants. You want them to learn about and understand one another better and you too will be learning about and understanding all the participants more completely through your questions.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of restorative processes is that everyone, including the facilitator, enters the process not knowing how it will come out. The strongest outcomes come from the collective wisdom of the group. Accessing the collective wisdom requires an ability to enter a process not knowing the answer. As a result ‘not knowing’ is a facilitation skill in the circle process.

Questions should never invite attacks on another individual or group but can invite participants to speak honestly in I-statements about their own experience, feelings, impacts, worries, etc.

Managing time – It is important to share responsibility for managing time with the entire circle. When introducing the talking piece the keeper can remind people of the time parameters encouraging participants to say what is really important to them and to also keep in mind the importance of making sure everyone else has a chance to speak. Helpful reminders about time may be appropriate during the circle as well. When establishing values or doing introduction rounds, it is sometimes useful to ask participants to limit their response to one or two sentences. It would generally not be helpful to limit participants when they are talking about the core issue of the circle.

Giving responsibility back to the group - If the talking piece comes back to you and you are uncertain about where the circle should go, it is okay to say, “I’m not sure where we should go from here,” and then pass the talking piece. Often someone in the group has an idea that is helpful. This technique allows you to demonstrate that leadership is a shared responsibility in the circle.

Using breaks - Breaks are a useful technique for managing difficult moments. On a break you can check in with anyone who seems to be struggling. After coming back from a break if it feels necessary, you can ask participants to look again at the values and review the guidelines before renewing the dialog.

Re-centering in the middle of a circle - Developments in a circle can throw you, the facilitator, off balance and trigger your anxiety, defensiveness or anger. It might be a result of escalation of tension among the participants or it might be the result of someone pushing one of your buttons. If that happens it is essential to take steps to re-center yourself. Your responsibility as a keeper requires you to be committed to the well-being of everyone in the circle. If you are off center it will be much more difficult for you to keep the circle safe for the participants. Self-awareness is the first step. Pay attention to your own emotional state, your sense of equilibrium. Can you look with acceptance and generosity of spirit toward everyone in the circle? If not, what are you feeling and toward whom? Internally acknowledge the feelings, don’t try to suppress them. Then take a deep breath and focus on your own centering tools which might include conscious deep breathing, silence, turning inward with self-empathy, prayer, signaling to your Co-Keeper

that you need a moment, imagining roots growing from your feet into the ground that can draw up centering energy the way that plant roots draw up water from the ground. If you are extremely off balance you may wish to call a break and consult with your Co-Keeper on how to safely continue the circle. You and your Co-Keeper may adjust your plan for sharing responsibilities to accommodate your struggle with staying centered. You may find it helpful to repeat a phrase over and over in your mind that helps you to release your anxiety, defensiveness or anger. Here are some possibilities:

- *It's not about me.*
- *It's not my job to fix this for the group. It's my job to sit with the discomfort and not withdraw or lash out.*
- *The circle can hold emotions and tension.*
- *Conflict is an opportunity to understand myself and others better.*

Another helpful technique for re-centering is to have a small stone or other object that you carry in your pocket for the purpose of reconnecting you to your best self when you are off center. When you become aware of being off-balance you can reach in and hold the object reminding yourself that your center is still there. Or you may notice where you are holding tension in your body. As you invite your body to release that tension you will move back toward your center. Sometimes it may be appropriate to acknowledge to the circle that you are struggling with your own feelings about something that came up in the circle. Acknowledging your own humanity and vulnerability can be a powerful way to build trust, and the process of admitting that you feel off center may help you move back toward your center.

Steps to re-centering in the middle of a circle:

1. *Self-awareness - recognize when you are no longer centered.*
2. *Hold a strong intention to return to center.*
3. *Develop a personal strategy that you use over and over so that it becomes a habit you can access under pressure.*

Practicing all three of these steps outside of circle with co-workers or family will increase your ability to re-center quickly in a circle.

Preparation and follow up are also useful. Think ahead of time about how you would like to respond if you get off-center. You will then be more likely to be able to respond constructively. After an experience of getting off center spend time with a support person or mentor who can help you debrief that experience and learn from it.

Being human - You may find that when you keep circles, you get nervous about how it will go, and about the need to be perfect. It is okay to ask for help from the circle. It is okay to not always get it 'right.' It is more important to make it safe enough for participants to let you know if it isn't working for them. That requires humility and openness to feedback. The circle is a very strong container if it is constructed on values. It is strong enough to hold mistakes or uncertainty. This is not about the keepers having all the answers; it is, rather, about the circle and

its members all making a good faith effort to work through the issues in way that is consistent with the values of the process. And we will all have moments when we do not live up to that lofty aspiration. That's okay – there will always be another chance to take responsibility and make things right if we make a mistake.