

Circle Keeper's Handbook

**by
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About the Author

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Since 1998, Kay has conducted Circle trainings in a diverse range of communities – from schools to prisons to workplaces to churches to families, and from rural towns in Minnesota to Chicago’s South Side to Montgomery, Alabama, to Costa Rica. She has written numerous articles on restorative justice and *The Little Book of Circle Processes: a New/Old Approach to Peacemaking*, and co-wrote *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*.

Kay’s intention in her work is to create spaces in which people can be in more loving connection with each other. Kay’s experience as a parent and a community activist form the foundation of her vision for peacemaking and community- building.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The circle is a dialog process that works intentionally to create a safe space to discuss very difficult or painful issues in order to improve relationships and resolve differences. The intent of the circle is to find resolutions that serve every member of the circle. The process is based on an assumption of equal worth and dignity for all participants and therefore provides equal voice to all participants. Every participant has gifts to offer in finding a good solution to the problem.

The circle process is deliberate in discussing how the conversation will be held before discussing the difficult issues. Consequently, the circle works on values and guidelines before talking about the differences or conflict. Where possible the circle also works on relationship building before discussing the difficult issues.

The responsibility of the keeper is to help the participants create a safe space for their conversation and to monitor the quality of the space throughout the circle. If the atmosphere becomes disrespectful, it is the responsibility of the keeper to bring the group's attention to that problem and help the group re-establish a respectful space.

The following qualities are helpful in fulfilling that task:

- Patience
- Humility
- Deep listening
- Acceptance of everyone as worthy of respect
- Willingness to sit with uncertainty
- Ability to share responsibility

Using a circle process is not simply a matter of putting chairs in a circle. Careful preparation is essential to good practice in using circles.

Preparation for a Circle

Convening people in a circle to resolve conflict requires significant preparation. There are three major tasks in preparing for a circle:

- Preparing the parties
- Planning the specifics of the circle
- Self preparation

Preparing the parties –The Circle Keeper(s) meet with each person who has agreed to participate in the circle individually. The purpose of the pre-meetings includes:

- Hearing the story or perspective of that person concerning the situation
- Explaining about circle process: taking time to establish shared group values and guidelines, ceremony, talking piece, roles of keepers and participants
- Answering questions about the process – how it works, who will be there, . . .
- Determining whether the person has any concerns about participating
- Identifying support people for the key parties to be invited to the circle
- Identifying others who might have been affected by the situation
- Clarifying confidentiality and the exceptions
- Building a relationship so the person will trust the Keeper(s) in the process
- Checking on willingness to talk about the key issues with the entire circle
- Checking on willingness to listen to others who may have a different view
- Finding out what the person would like to get out of the circle process
- Determining whether the person is willing to participate in a circle process

It is often helpful in the pre-meetings to emphasize that every participant has an equal chance to speak; that no one can interrupt whoever is speaking; and that it is always okay to pass if you do not wish to speak.

Based on the interviews with all of the circle participants the Co-Keepers:

- determine whether there are others whose participation could be helpful in the circle (e.g. supporters for the key parties in conflict, third parties who are respected by both of the key parties and are not aligned with either of the key parties on this issue, others who have been affected by the situation, etc.)
- identify the key issues that appear to be important to discuss in the circle

Information about the key issues is used to help formulate questions for the circle. If it becomes clear that additional people are appropriate for the circle the Co-Keepers inform the other participants, invite the additional people and conduct a pre-meeting with any additional participants.

Planning the specifics of the circle – The Co-Keepers begin putting together the circle plan answering the following questions:

- What time?
- Where?
- What will be the talking piece?

- What will be in the center?
- What opening ceremony will be used?
- What question will be used to generate values for the circle?
- What question will be used for an introduction or check-in round?
- Is there a need for further relationship building before getting into the issues? If so, how will that be done?
- What question(s) will be used to begin the dialog about the key issues?
- What further questions might be useful if the group is not getting deeply enough into the issues?
- Once there is a good clearing of emotion what questions can be used to begin exploring steps to move toward resolution or an agreement?
- What closing ceremony will be used?

The Keeper(s) further develop the plan for the circle based on the questions above and the Circle Outline (p. --). The Keeper(s) also decide how to share the responsibilities of keeping the circle. The plan is always seen as flexible and open to modification according to the needs of the circle group.

Self-preparation - Preparing the parties to participate in circle and preparing the plan for engaging participants in the circle are very important parts of the preparation process. There is one more critical part of preparation. That is self-preparation. The space of circle is not our normal space. It calls for intentional behavior that is aligned with the values as much as possible. That is not easy to do in the context of high pressure jobs and personal lives. Prioritizing time for self-preparation is a core responsibility of being a keeper.

Self-preparation has two dimensions:

- Preparation before a specific circle.
- Developing on-going habits which cultivate the qualities helpful in keeping a circle.

Self-preparation before a specific circle includes –

- Getting enough rest
- Eating properly
- Centering yourself
- Clearing the mind of other distractions
- Turning off your cell phone, pagers, etc.
- Arriving at the site in time to relax before the circle begins
- Breathing deeply and releasing tension as much as possible

Centering may be achieved through deep breathing, a walk outside, music, quiet time by yourself or whatever strategy works for you.

Developing on-going habits which cultivate the qualities helpful in keeping a circle includes -

Working on personal growth – Since keepers serve as models and set the tone for circles it is important that you undertake inner work. Engage in ongoing inner work, regularly checking your thoughts and behaviors against your core values and circle principles. Just before a circle gathering, take time to center yourself and cultivate inner peace.

Self knowledge – Know your stuff. We all have particular things that are challenging for us. We all

have histories that may make us prone to having our buttons pushed by certain issues or types of personalities. Be aware of your buttons, your “stuff,” and how it might affect your keeping a circle. Perhaps you have a hard time knowing how to relate to loud, boisterous people, or perhaps your history makes it hard for you to be objective in discussions about a particular issue. Know your stuff and work at finding ways to keep it from getting in the way of your keeping.

Self-care – Keeping is emotionally challenging work. Especially during times when you are keeping a circle process, take care of yourself in ways that work for you. In your self-care try to include a balance of:

- *physical* – exercise, eat well, get enough sleep.
- *emotional* – probe and experience your feelings through reflection, journaling, or with friends.
- *spiritual* – meditate or participate in other spiritual practices.
- *mental* – find ways to stimulate your mind. Avoid over-analyzing your circle work: read a book, do a puzzle, engage in creative arts, whatever works for you.

Essential Elements of Constructing the Circle

The Circle Keeper 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 resolution of their conflict or difficulty.

- **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 concern 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.

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. Centerpieces can be collectively built with more and more representation of the group and the individuals in the circle as time goes on.

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. Often 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 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.

Guiding questions – Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of many rounds 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.

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. In an on-going group participants may be involved in doing openings and closings or may design the opening and closing for the group.

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 and safe, 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. It is not the keeper's role to fix the problem the circle is addressing. 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,
 - Summarize ideas of the group for resolution,
 - Lead the process of determining consensus.
-

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:

- encourage participants to speak from their own lived experience (e.g. How have you been impacted? What has this situation been like for you? What has been the hardest thing for you? What do you need to move forward? What can you offer to help this situation?)
- invite participants to share stories from their lives (Share an experience when you . . .)
- focus on feelings and impacts rather than facts
- 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 the answer
- 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.

The field of Appreciative Inquiry is a helpful resource for designing questions that probe strengths and move participants to identifying positive possibilities for going forward. Appendix 1 Sample Prompting Questions is another resource for circle questions. Questions should never invite attacks on another individual or group.

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.

Many of the issues that come to circles cannot be resolved in one circle. The process should not be rushed. Everyone needs to have opportunity to be heard. It’s appropriate to continue the process over two or more circles as participants work through what they need to talk about and what they want to do to improve the situation. If the circle continues for more than one session bring the values/guidelines created in the first circle to all subsequent circles. Do an opening ceremony and check-in round before going back to the place that you left off in the previous circle.

Offering standard guidelines – When time is too short to have the circle generate its own guidelines you may as keeper suggest standard guidelines and ask the group if they are okay with those guidelines or whether there is anything they feel they need to add. Following are typical standard guidelines:

- Honor the talking piece when it is being used.
- Speak and listen with respect.
- Speak and listen from the heart.
- Personal information shared in circle stays in circle.
- Take the time you need while being mindful of the need for others to have time.
- Take care of yourself.

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 you can ask

participants to look again at the values and review the guidelines before renewing the dialog.

Getting to the real issues – You may find that key issues raised by participants in pre-meetings are not being discussed in the circle. You should not raise those issues yourself but it is appropriate to ask questions or prompts encouraging participants to raise them. It is also important to be aware that there might be good reasons that people are not opening up. Participants should not be pressured to talk about anything they are not ready to talk about. Remember that it is always okay to pass.

Following are some questions or prompts that might open up the dialog:

- I'm not hearing anyone talk about the issues folks raised in the pre-meetings. Is this what the group wants?
- Restate the purpose of the circle as stated in the Request and ask – Are we getting at the purpose of this circle?
- What is unspoken in the group that blocks good relationships or possible success?
- What is the unspoken tension in the room?

You can also try taking a break and checking in with the people who expressed concerns in pre-meetings that are not being voiced in the circle.

Another strategy is to shift from the difficult topic to a different approach with a question such as:

- If you could change one thing in your job what would that be?
- Or a storytelling question (see Appendix 1) that reminds people of common ground

Or take a break and get people laughing through a physical game and then return to circle.

People may be reluctant to speak honestly about the issues because of fear. If that is the case, you may need to adjourn the circle and do further preparation to increase the sense of safety or bring in additional people who create a greater sense of safety.

Suspending the talking piece – In the problem solving or agreement part of the circle it may be useful to suspend the talking piece and allow brainstorming or informal dialog among participants. After a period without the talking piece it is important to use it again to make sure all voices are heard. If one or more participants object to the use of the talking piece, it is very important to do a round with the talking piece to find out how everyone else feels about using the talking piece. You do not want to respond immediately to the loudest voice(s), potentially disempowering quieter people who would still want the talking piece. If you stop using a talking piece altogether, it is no longer a circle. That could have significant implications for some participants who might have come expecting the safety and order of a talking piece and might not have chosen to participate in another kind of process. If you do completely stop using a talking piece it is important to inform the group that you are changing the process. Clearly state what process you are now using so that everyone is clear.

Re-centering in the middle of a circle - Developments in a circle can throw you 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:

Self-awareness - recognize when you are no longer centered.

Hold a strong intention to return to center.

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.

Agreements in the Circle

If the Circle is making agreements those agreements are made by consensus. Consensus in the Circle is defined as “everyone can live with the decision.” It does not require that everyone be enthusiastic, but does require that everyone in the Circle can support the decision.

The following set of questions can be useful in checking whether the group does have consensus. In a robust consensus all participants can answer ‘yes’ to these three questions:

- Have you had the opportunity to express your views?
- Do you believe the group has heard you?
- Can you actively support this decision as the best one the group can make at this time even it is not your first choice?

Any agreement should include some method of monitoring whether the agreement is working and a plan for responding to failure of the agreement. Generally, the best response to any failure is coming back to circle together to discuss any problems with the agreement. It is important that any agreements are recorded in some way. Lack of clarity about who is going to do what or what behavior will change can lead to frustration and disillusionment with the process. It is very important that everyone is clear about expectations after the circle. Written agreements are often the best way to achieve the necessary level of clarity and understanding by all parties.

Combining Circle with Other Formats

Circles can be used with many other forms of dialog. Some facilitators trained in other processes combine circle with mediation techniques or with conferencing techniques. In combining circles with other techniques it is effective to surround the other dialog with circle. Begin by establishing the circle with opening, check-in and some dialog with the talking piece. You can then suspend the talking piece for open dialog or facilitator-directed dialog. After a period of open dialog resume the use of the talking piece in circle to share reactions to what has come up in the open dialog. Also use the talking piece for a final closing round

In general in a circle the talking piece can be suspended to allow a spontaneous form of interaction for a period of time – for instance a brainstorming session. It is very important to resume the use of the talking piece after a period of open dialog to ensure the inclusion of all voices and to create a period of reflection after a period of stimulation. In most groups a small number of people will dominate open discussion. Additionally, **if the talking piece is suspended for open dialog for too long it will no longer be a circle** because the talking piece effectively engages everyone in process responsibility. Without the talking piece the facilitator must take more control of the dialog and that reduces the degree of self-responsibility of the members of the group.

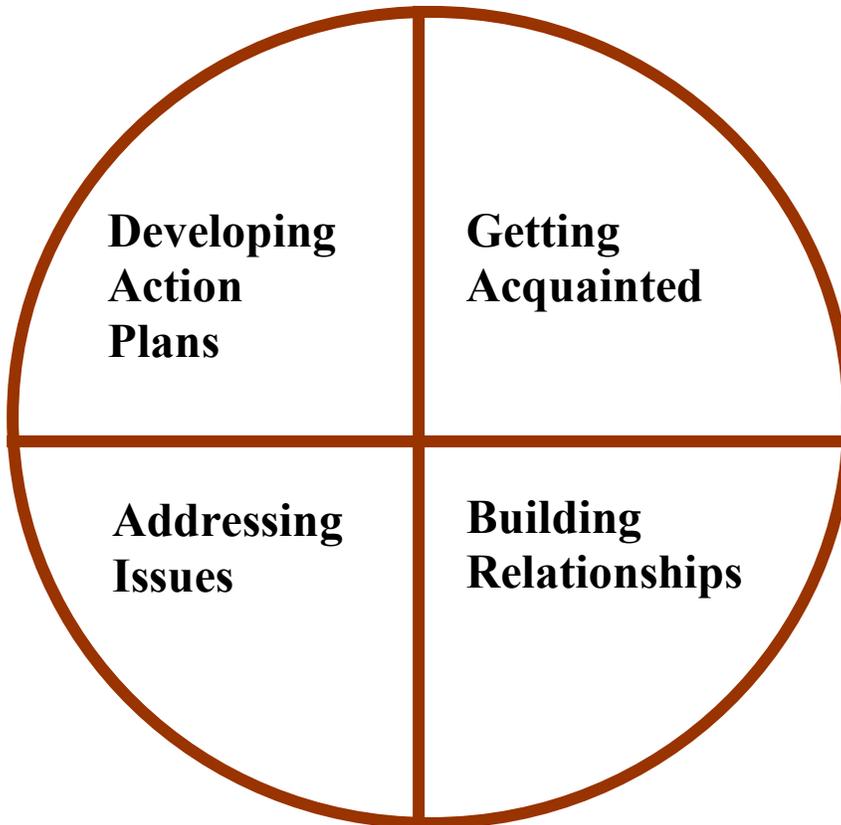
Differences Between Circle and Other Processes

Though circle can be combined with other processes the circle has several unique characteristics that distinguish circle from other processes.

Circle	Conferencing
Talking piece regulates the dialog	Facilitator directs the dialog – particularly in the early stages
Explicit discussion of values before discussing issues	No discussion of values
Group creation of guidelines	Facilitator provides ground rules and asks group for additions
Do not jump directly to the issues	Process goes directly to the participants to identify the issues
Deliberate marking of the space as a space apart through opening and closing ceremony	No use of ceremony but rather opening and closing consistent with pre-meetings
Facilitator is also a participant	Facilitator does not participate as a stakeholder

The circle commitment to relationship building before discussion of the core issue is a very important part of the circle process. Circles deliberately delay the dialog about the contentious issues until the group has done some work on relationship building. An introduction round with a question inviting people to share something about themselves, the creation of circle values and guidelines, and a storytelling round on a topic tangentially related to the key issue precede the discussion of the difficult issues that are the focus of the circle. These parts of the circle generate a deeper awareness within the circle of how their human journeys have generated similar experiences, expectations, fears, dreams and hopes. These opening parts of the circle also present participants to one another in unexpected ways, gently challenging assumptions they may have made about one another. Creating guidelines together provides an opportunity for the group to experience finding common ground in spite of serious differences. A circle intentionally does **not** “get right to the issues.” Taking time to create a sense of shared space and connection in the group increases the level of emotional safety which allows deeper truth telling. It also promotes awareness of the humanity of all participants.

Balance in the Process



The importance of relationship building to the process is evident in the diagram above that divides the process into four parts based on the widely used Native American framework of the Medicine Wheel, which is a circle divided into four equal parts. One of the lessons of the Medicine Wheel is that the four parts must be in balance. In this case it means that, overall, as much time is spent on getting acquainted and building relationships as is spent on exploring the issues and developing plans.

Circle Outline

The detail in this outline is provided to offer concrete examples and stimulate creative thinking. It is not intended to be prescriptive. The circle is not a rigid process. It is always important to be responsive in the moment to the needs of the circle participants which may not follow the outline you planned. Nonetheless, it can be useful to have an outline to guide you as a keeper.

Welcome: Welcome everyone to the circle. Thank them for coming. Express appreciation for the willingness to work together to resolve a difficult issue.

Opening: Openings mark the time and space of the Circle as a space apart from the pace and tone of everyday life. The opening ceremony is designed to help participants center themselves, be reminded of core values, clear negative energies, encourage optimism and honor the presence of everyone there. Lead the group in whatever opening ceremony you have chosen. (See Appendix 2 – Sample Opening and Closing Ceremonies.)

Explain Center: If you have created a centerpiece, identify any items in the center and why they are there.

Explain Talking Piece: Explain that the talking piece is a critical element of creating a space in which all participants can both speak and listen from a deep place of truth. The person holding the talking piece has the opportunity to speak without interruption while everyone else has the opportunity to listen without the need to respond. The talking piece will be passed around the circle from person to person. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. It is always okay to pass the talking piece without speaking. The keeper may speak without the talking piece if necessary to facilitate the process, but generally will not speak without the talking piece. If the talking piece has a particular meaning, explain that.

Purpose: Remind participants of the purpose of the circle.

Introduction/Check-in Round: Tell participants that you are going to pass the talking piece around so that we can all hear how everyone is doing today. Invite participants to introduce themselves if they are not already acquainted. We suggest the keeper share first. People will most likely model their response after the keeper. Be authentic. Pass the talking piece and ask, “How are you feeling today?” “Is there anything you feel is important for us to know about how you are doing?” Sometimes it is useful to pose a question in this round that invites sharing about oneself so the participants get to know one another better. (For possible questions see ‘Getting acquainted’ in Appendix 1 – Sample Prompting Questions.)

Values/Guidelines: Before the circle place a paper plate or half sheet of paper and a marker at each seat. Ask participants to think of a value they feel would be important in order to work through this conflict or issue in a good way. Ask them to write the value on the paper plate or sheet of paper. Pass the talking piece and ask them to share the value they chose, explain why it is important, and place their value in the center of the circle. Keeper models. After establishing values, develop guidelines for the circle. The guidelines of the Circle are the agreements that participants make with one another about how to behave in the Circle. They establish clear expectations and common ground to provide a

space where people feel safe to speak in their authentic voice, connect to others in a good way and ensure a space that is respectful for all. Pass the talking piece and ask participants to name one agreement important to their participation in Circle. (e.g. “Speak only for yourself.” or “Keep body language respectful.”) Write down the suggested guidelines on a sheet of paper or flip chart. When the talking piece has gone all the way around, read the list. Pass the talking piece and ask participants to indicate whether they accept these guidelines. If there are objections explore the objections and the original purpose of the person who proposed that guideline and work to find wording that is acceptable to everyone. Extensive conversation about the guidelines can be good practice for those in conflict to work through a difference in a respectful way.

Storytelling Round: In some circles it is crucial to take the time for people to share stories from their own lives to increase understanding of one another or to build empathy. Stories often shatter stereotypes or assumptions conflicting parties have about one another making it possible for them to hear one another more clearly when they discuss the difficult issues later in the circle. (See ideas for storytelling in Appendix 1 – Sample Prompting Questions) The Keeper always goes first in a storytelling round.

Exploring Issues: Pass the talking piece, posing a question about the issue or concern that is the purpose of the circle. (For possible questions see Appendix 1 – Sample Prompting Questions) Follow with multiple rounds about the feelings, impacts, concerns of the issue. Thank participants for frank conversation about their concerns. Acknowledge the courage that it takes to be here and to try to work things out in a good way.

Generating plans for a better future: Pass the talking piece and ask participants what they think can be done to repair any harm and to create a better future. On a further pass ask each participant what s/he can offer to help make a better future a reality. (For possible questions see Appendix 1 – Sample Prompting Questions)

Agreement: Determine any plans or commitments that are important to the circle and everyone agrees on. Write those down.

Clarify Expectations: Pass the talking piece to ask how people will know that the circle has improved the situation and what sort of follow up they want to ensure the integrity of the process.

Check-out Round: Pass the talking piece around and ask participants to share their thoughts about the Circle or one word that sums up how they are feeling right now as the Circle comes to a close.

Thanks: Thank everyone for coming and for their efforts to resolve the conflict in a respectful way that allows everyone to be at peace with themselves.

Closing: Lead the circle in a closing ceremony. (See Appendix 2 – Sample Opening and Closing Ceremonies.)

Materials Needed: Determine from the outline all the materials you need to bring to the circle (e.g. paper plates for values, markers, talking piece, center items, readings or other opening materials, the circle outline, etc.)

Follow-up

Follow up after a circle is a very important part of the process. The keeper's responsibility includes several follow-up tasks:

- Thorough debriefing with the co-keeper, to learn from the experience and assess the need for checking in with any participants.
- Checking in with any participant for whom the circle was very stressful or upsetting.
- Planning for further circles if the group decided to meet again.
- Monitoring fulfillment of any agreement.

In addition to the tasks above after any circle it is important for keepers to practice some form of self-care that allows the keeper to release any tension or burden that might result from the emotionality of the circle process. Personal practices vary and may include physical activity, a long bath, leisurely tea, relaxing music, time with pets, etc. The important thing is to be intentional about releasing anything that is not yours to carry.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Sample Prompting Questions/Topics for Circles

Appendix 2

Sample Opening and Closing Ceremonies

Appendix 3

Tips for Alternate Check-ins

Appendix 1

Sample Prompting Questions/Topics for Circles

Exploring values:

- What value would you like to offer for our space together?
- What value do you think would help us have this conversation in a way that causes no further harm?
- When you are being human, at your best, what values guide you? (in a word or short phrase)
- Imagine you are in conflict with a person who is important in your life. What values do you want to guide your conduct as you try to work out that conflict?
- What is your passion?
- What do you keep returning to in your life?
- What touches your heart?
- What gives you hope?
- What demonstrates respect?
- What makes a good friend?
- Tell us about an important characteristic of someone you admire.
- With whom or where are you most like what those values describe?
- Which of our values do you struggle with the most?
- Which of our values have you seen someone in this circle exemplify?

Establishing guidelines:

- What agreements would you like for us in our circle to feel that you can speak honestly and respectfully?
- What behavioral agreements for how we treat each other in this dialog will help you be in alignment with the values we have established?
- What's important to you in how we have this conversation?

Getting acquainted:

- Tell us about who you are and a passion in your life.
- Tell us about how you came to be part of this community and what you value about this community.
- Who are your people?
- What brought you to this job/career/field of work? What does this work mean to you?
- How long have you worked in this organization and in what roles?
- What is the most satisfying aspect of your job?
- Share a story of a proud moment in your work.
- What do you do to release stress from the job?
- Share a funny story from your life/work.
- What do you appreciate about your family/community/work?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What would you not want to change about your life?
- If you had an unexpected free day, what would you like to do?
- What is your cultural heritage and what role does it play in your life?

Storytelling from our lives to share who we are and what has shaped us (to build understanding of one another and to increase empathy)

Invite participants to share:

- A time when you had to let go of control.
- A time when you were outside your comfort zone.
- An experience in your life when you “made lemonade out of lemons.”
- An experience of transformation when, out of a crisis or difficulty, you discovered a gift in your life.
- A time when you had to hear something very difficult from someone and afterward were grateful that it happened.
- An experience of causing harm to someone and then dealing with it in a way you felt good about.
- An experience of letting go of anger or resentment.
- A time when you acted on your core values even though others were not.

- An experience where you discovered that someone was very different from the negative assumptions you first made about that person.
- An experience of feeling that you did not fit in.
- A time in your life when you experienced justice.
- An embarrassing moment that you can laugh at now.
- When have you been welcomed back?
- Share an adventure in your life.

Exploring issues or concerns:

- How have you been impacted by recent/pending changes at this organization?
- How have you been affected by this situation?
- How do you feel about this situation?
- What are you worried about regarding this situation?
- What are your concerns?
- What is your greatest fear in this relationship/situation?
- What's been the hardest part of this situation for you?
- How have you been affected mentally, physically and emotionally by this situation?
- What do you need the other person(s) to know or understand about you?

Taking responsibility:

- How have we each contributed to this situation, and how can each of us, by taking responsibility, act differently now?
- What needs to happen now to create a healthy workplace/family/community?
- Does anyone have anything to clear up with someone else in the circle?
- What is unspoken in the group that blocks good relationships or possible success?
- What are the unresolved conflicts that you would like to find a way to work through?
- What do we need to do now to repair the harm that happened and to make sure it doesn't happen again?
- What change would you like to see in your work group/family/community? What can you do to promote that change?
- In your experience what supports healing?
- Where do we go from here?

Clarifying expectations about the future:

- What do you expect to do differently as a result of this circle?
- What do you expect to be different (in this family/community/work relationship) after this circle?
- How will you know if things are better?
- What follow-up do you suggest to make sure that the understandings we have reached are working?

Checking on consensus on an agreement:

- Have you had the opportunity to express your views?
- Do you believe the group has heard you?
- Can you support this decision as the best one the group can make at this time, even if it is not your first choice?
- Can you live with this plan?
- Scaling question about agreement: On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 representing the idea that there is no way this plan could succeed and 10 representing the idea that there is no way this plan could fail, what number would you assign to the likelihood of success of this plan?
- Possible follow up: What change to the plan would move your assessment up one or two numbers?

Toward the end of a circle:

- Is there anything you came with that you would like to leave behind?
- What are you taking from this circle that supports your healing?
- Where do you see yourself moving forward?
- What have you learned?
- What can you take away that is useful to you?

- How will these insights help you in the next two weeks?

Exploring participants' relationship to conflict

- Do you have an experience in your life where conflict or a difficulty with another person led to a deeper relationship?
- Where do you feel it in your body when you need to deal directly with a conflict or difficulty with another person?
- What do you do when you feel a conflict emerging?
- What would you like to try to do?
- What are the situations where you 'keep your truth to yourself' and it might be useful to others to know your truth?

Resilience/self care

- What sustains you – what do you draw on in order to give to others?
- How can we support one another in difficult times?

Justice

- What does justice mean to you?
- What experiences have shaped your perception of justice?

Race

- How much of your life is dealing with race?
- How often are you reminded of your race?
- How often do you have to negotiate issues because of your race?

Appendix 2

Sample Opening and Closing Ceremonies

Quotes

One simple way to mark the beginning of a circle is through the use of short quotations. Read clearly, quotes can provide a focal point for entry into a different space. Here are some examples of quotations that may be useful.

“The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where one stands in times of challenge and controversy.”
-Martin Luther King

“In separateness lies the world's great misery; in compassion lies the world's true strength.”
-Buddha

-Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.
-Albert Einstein

“Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it stands than to anything on which it is poured.”
-Anonymous

“There never was a war that was not inward; I must fight till I have conquered in myself what causes war. “
-Marianne Moore

“The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells the Great Spirit, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.”
-Black Elk

“Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace. “
-Buddha

“Do you know what astonished me most in the world? The inability of force to create anything. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the spirit.”
-Napoleon Bonaparte

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I will meet you there."
-Rumi

"How do I listen to others?
As if everyone where my Master
Speaking to me
His cherished last words"
-Hafiz

Readings

For numerous readings see the MN DOC website www.doc.state.mn.us Click on **Restorative Justice** and then on **Inspirational Openings and Closings**.

Deep breathing and relaxation

Following is a sample script for deep breathing:

Mindful Breathing

Find a place where you are sitting comfortably. If you feel okay doing so, close your eyes. If you don't want to, then just find a place in front of you where you can gently focus—maybe on the table, floor, or the wall across from where you are sitting. Now take four deep breaths. Feel your chest rise and fall as you take in the air and let it out. Each time you breathe in, imagine taking in a calm, peaceful feeling. As you breathe out, let all the stress leave your body. Let your shoulders relax and soften. Let your eyes and face relax and soften. Let all the stress leave your whole body.

Continue with more breaths to simply pay attention to your breathing. One place in your body to follow your breathing is your nose. Notice how the air feels as it comes in through your nostrils. Perhaps the air is cooler as you breath in but slightly warmer as you exhale. Follow the breath completely as you breathe out.

Another place to become aware of your breathing is in your belly. It sometimes helps to gently place your hands across your stomach—almost like you are holding a basketball. Notice how your belly expands or gets bigger as you take a breath in and the air fills your lungs. As you breathe out, you'll feel your chest and belly sink—just like letting the air out of a basketball. Let your breath come and go naturally. You don't have to "try" and take deep or regular breaths. Just let your body's natural breathing rhythm happen. Your job is not to change your breath; it's just to pay attention to what's going on already.

Silence

Collective silence can be a highly effective means of beginning a session in a calm, focused manner. Silence can be combined with contemplation (e.g. 'what is most important for you to say today'), writing (e.g. 'what brought to here. '), drawing (e.g. 'how are you feeling today?') or simply a few deep and intentional breaths before beginning to circulate the talking piece.

Activities

Passing: passing an item around the circle (before the talking piece) may bring people together over a common symbol.

Tying: "Weave a web between people in a circle by having each participant hold a piece of yarn and throw the ball of yarn to another person in the circle while sharing a [brief] story or emotion to represent their shared journey into conflict (Schirch, 2005, pg. 168)"

Ball of clay: explain that you possess a ball of clay which can be turned into any object. The object must be sculpted out of the invisible clay, then without speaking, used for its purpose to demonstrate what it is. For example, you may sculpt a fishing rod, which you then use to briefly act out the scene of catching a fish. After this is done, go through the motions of forming the clay back into a ball, and pass it to the next person in the circle. Again, this simple game allows people to express their creativity and personality non-verbally, and begins the circle on a note of fun.

Group story (closing): One person begins----"Once upon a time there was a team....." and completes the sentence. Each person adds one meaningful sentence that builds on the sentence that came before it. The story should travel around the circle once—twice for smaller groups with the last person in the circle contributing the final sentence and then saying "...and that for now is the end!!"

Ribbon ceremony of encouragement (closing): Distribute one piece of ribbon about a yard long to each person. Turn to the person to your left. While tying your ribbon to that person's ribbon give some words of encouragement to that person.

When you have finished invite the person to your left to turn to the person to his/her left, tie the ribbon to the next person's ribbon and say something encouraging to that person. Repeat around the circle until the ribbon is tied all the way around and each person has both given and received encouragement.

Self affirmation (closing): Pass a roll of toilet paper around the circle inviting participants to take as many sheets as they wish from the roll before passing it to the next person. Ask them to separate and stack the sheets they tore off the roll. Pass the talking piece asking each participant to make a positive statement about him or her self for each piece of toilet paper they have – and encourage them to do statements about their physical being, their mental being, their emotional being and their spiritual being. We suggest that the keeper go first to model the activity.

Puzzle (opening): Create or purchase a puzzle with very large pieces (such as a children's floor puzzle). Pass a container with the pieces asking each participant to take a piece and say something about how the piece fits them. Keep passing until all the pieces are distributed. Ask participants to go to the center and put the puzzle together.

Human sculpture (opening): Explain that we are going to make a human sculpture. Ask for someone who is willing to start the sculpture. Invite that person into the center of the circle to take a position and hold the position until the sculpture is finished. One by one going clockwise around the circle from the person who started the sculpture ask each participant to come to the center and arrange themselves in the human sculpture and then hold that position until it is finished. When the sculpture is finished ask participants to take a deep breath and notice their creation as something more than the collection of their individual identities. Invite them to take another deep breath and then to return to their chairs in the circle. Place the centerpiece items in the center of the circle.

Rainstorm activity: Keeper starts by rubbing hands palm to palm up and down in front of his/her chest; the next person to the left joins in the motion and then the next and the next all around the circle like a wave, with the Keeper continuing the motion while it moves around the circle. When the motion returns to the keeper, the keeper stops the hand rubbing and begins alternately slapping hands on his/her thighs. The next person follows the keeper's change and one by one around the circle each person follows the change of movement of the person before them. When it returns again to the keeper, the keeper stops slapping the thighs and alternately stomps feet. This movement then is followed one by one around the circle. When it returns to the keeper the keeper stops stomping the feet and again does the thigh slapping motion and that motion is passed around the circle. Finally the keeper once again does the hand rubbing motion. When that motion comes back to the keeper, the keeper stops all motion. One by one each person in the circle follows the person before them in stopping until all are quiet.

Music

Music can bring the attention of the room together in the context of a shared or similar emotional experience. The type of music, and whether or not to choose instrumental or vocal music, will vary greatly with the context.

Movement

Lead the group through the following simple yoga movements for an opening or a closing:

1. With palms together in front of your heart, ground through the feet and feel the connection with the earth through the soles of the feet.
2. Exhale and fold forward from the waist to touch the earth with your hands. Bend your knees to make this comfortable.
3. From here, take a deep breathe in, and sweep your arms skyward as you stand upright. Bring your palms together overhead and look up as you stretch upward.
4. Exhale as you bring your arms down palms together in front of the heart.
5. Inhale as you sweep your arms outward and up skyward, palms together looking up. Exhale as bring your arms down palms together in front of the heart.
6. Inhale as you sweep your arms outward and up skyward, palms together looking up. Exhale as bring your arms down palms together in front of the heart.

Appendix 3

Tips for Alternate Check-ins

Questions for verbal check-in:

What was the low point of your last week; what was the high point of your last week?

How are you feeling today? Is there anything you feel is important for us to know?

How do you feel about being here in the circle today?

What are you carrying into the room that you would like to dump before we go into our activity?

What would you like us to know about what's up with you that will prevent misunderstandings among us?

What's bringing joy in your life right now?

Body check-in:

Invite everyone to stand. Explain that we will do check-in with our bodies without using words. One by one around the circle each person will pantomime either how they feel or what has happened before coming or anything else important for them to convey to the group. For instance one might pantomime getting up and showering, taking the dog out, driving or walking to the site, rushing around, getting a phone call with good news or bad news, etc. Each one will do his/her pantomime alone and then will immediately repeat the very same motions with everyone else in the circle joining him/her. And then the next person will do her/his pantomime and then repeat it with everyone joining in. It is, of course, always okay to pass. Keeper goes first to model the activity.

Art check-in:

When participants arrive at the room have a table of art materials available. As they enter ask participants to create something from the art materials that symbolizes how they feel right now or how they are doing since you last met. In the check-in round invite them to share their pieces and put them in the center of the circle. They may pass on doing the art piece, sharing about it or putting their piece in the circle. It may be helpful for the keeper to go first if the group is tentative in this activity.

Medicine Wheel check-in:

Distribute a sheet with a circle image divided into four equal parts with those parts labeled: mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. Ask participants to put one or two words in each section to describe how they are doing on that dimension of their lives. In the check-in round invite participants to share the words in each section.