

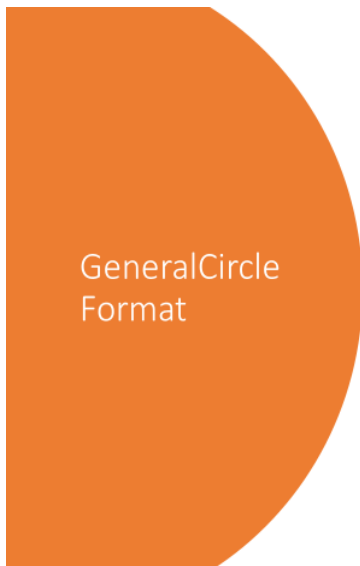


Talking Circles

Quick Start Guide

Talking circles are grounded in the ancient wisdom of the world's indigenous cultures. That they have survived such dramatic changes in the world is a testament to their power and purpose. Today, talking circles are used in justice systems, education, and, increasingly, in health and business settings. Their foundational principles of encouraging discourse, respect, and dialogue make them ideal for deepening understanding, creating connection, and exploring issues. The energy in a talking circle is created through a sense of interconnectedness, being intentionally thoughtful, and creating a non-competitive environment for sharing and listening.

Talking circles come in all shapes and sizes. Groups who circle often will develop norms and learn when adjustments need to be made. Circles can precede, include, or end an activity. They are adaptable and the circle format should be responsive to the needs of the group. Below you will find the basic circle format. The elements of the format are designed to create an intentional space that invites everyone to participate fully and authentically.



Gather in an open circle around a centerpiece

Introduce the talking piece

Opening

Review Agreements

Check In

Discussion Rounds

Check Out

Closing

A circle begins with a welcoming space, talking piece, and a circle facilitator. The process is simple: The facilitator opens the space where participants have gathered in a circle and reminds the group of the circle agreements. The center of the circle is a shared space where it can be helpful to place a centerpiece. The centerpiece represents the center of the community, reminds us of our collective nature, and provides a place for participants to rest their eyes. Like the talking piece, centerpieces are even more meaningful when they

represent something of value. Next, a talking piece is introduced and passed clockwise to each participant. When a participant has the talking piece, they can share their thoughts about the topic openly and honestly. When they are finished the participant will pass the talking piece clockwise to the next person. Participants may choose not to speak and simply continue to pass the talking piece around the circle until everyone has had the opportunity to respond to the discussion prompt.

Before you begin a talking circle, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- ✓ Prepare yourself. Check in with yourself and understand your current state. Your calm and peaceful presence will help the participants be fully present. Take steps to prepare yourself to listen and authentically share.
- ✓ Prepare the space. Seating should be arranged in a circle and placed in such a way that participants are facing one another without barriers. Using a centerpiece can help people by providing a place to focus and cuts down on distractions.

✓ Prepare your participants. Take some time to explain what will happen. Introduce the talking piece. Emphasize the agreement that the only person who should be talking is the person with the talking piece. Review the guidelines your group has agreed to or list some basic agreements and ask those participating if there are other agreements that would help them feel safe enough to fully participate. Below are some commonly used circle agreements:

- Respect the talking piece (one person speaks at a time, no interrupting)
- Honor privacy
- Speak from the heart and speak for yourself
- Participate, do not dominate, time is our shared resource
- It is okay to pass

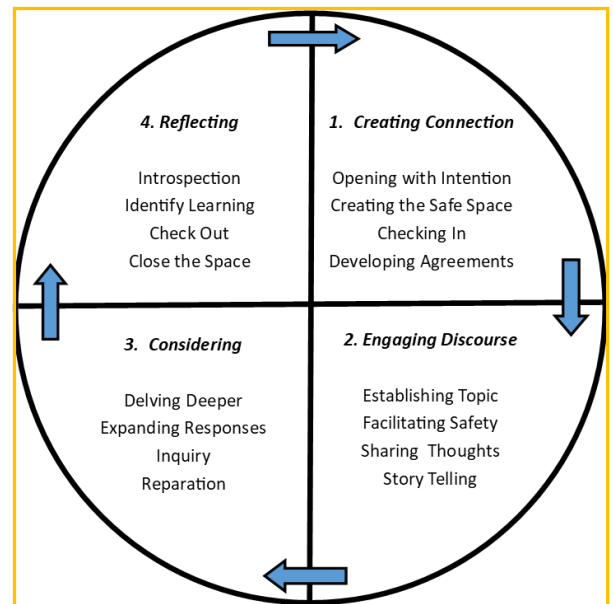
In North America talking circles originated with First Nations leaders. It was a process that ensured that all voices were heard. The emphasis was on listening and reflecting. The particular power of the talking circle is that it is an intentional space to share perceptions and opinions. It is not a time for debate, problem-solving, or decision-making. A talking circle can help to ensure all concerns and ideas are heard, and no one leaves without having had the opportunity to share their thoughts. The intention is that the person holding the talking piece speaks truth and does not use it as an opportunity to proselytize or bandstand for manipulation.

The circle facilitator’s primary job is to hold a safe, equitable space for the participants to connect and consider. Be mindful of your role and prepare to manage situations that might derail the intention of coming together. If participants are new to this kind of interaction they might forget not to respond to those sharing. A gentle reminder of your agreements or the role of the talking piece can be helpful.

Sometimes the circle may bring up emotional issues for people and it is important to touch base with them once the circle is concluded. In our highly driven, fast-paced, highly technical lives, it can be an emotional process for someone to be asked to share their thoughts, even when the topic is not necessarily an emotional one. Being heard can be a powerful experience for many of us. As a facilitator, it is important to demonstrate that having a strong reaction is okay. In some cases, it is best to have someone designated to companion someone who might struggle with the process or content. There are more suggestions for overcoming issues below.

The work of a circle is to create connections, encourage discourse, consider topics deeply, and reflect on the thoughts that are shared. The graphic above illustrates one type of flow to the circle process. It is helpful to be fully transparent about what is the goal of the circle. Consider using a graphic to help visual learners see the process in which they are participating.

Every Circle develops a unique flow based on its goals.



Finally, remember that participants are partners in the process and while the role of facilitator is important and necessary, there is no hierarchy in a circle. Consider when stepping up and when stepping back will help the circle. Less is more in this situation, but participants need to know that someone is going to speak up for safety.

Circle processes can create a new and different path for group members to relate to and support each other in striving to reach shared goals. Every circle is unique and powerful in its own way. Trust the process. Be brave, be patient, and be sincere.

Circles have been utilized in organizational settings for long enough for common challenges to arise. These challenges can be overcome with a little assistance. Following are some solutions that have been used effectively by circle facilitators.

If This...	Try This...
It is taking too long to get into a circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice circling up • Circle at a consistent time • Time the process and challenge participants to beat their time. • Plan ahead of time for furniture placement • Consider alternative circling spots • Ask participants to come up with solutions
The circle is taking too long	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask for check ins to be one or two words • Be flexible with prompts • Time spent allowing partners to feel heard is well spent
No one is talking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use artistic activities • It is okay not to share sometimes but do try every time. • Start with a pair share • Try to set a fun and community building tone then build into serious content over time • Ask participants to brainstorm why no one is talking • Use prompts participants want to answer
There are derailing behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit agreements and values • Try to determine the function of the behavior and focus on that, “It seems like this topic makes you uncomfortable” • Engage participants who derail to come up with prompts or ask them to consider taking on the facilitation role • Have a one to one restorative discussion at a different time
One or two participants do most of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step up, Step Back • Have participants make/bring their own talking piece • Consider giving natural leaders a job • In private conversations ask quiet participants what they need to participate more
Participants are sharing about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a phrase such as, “I want to respect the circle goals, but I would like to spend time with you after the circle to continue your thoughts” • Return to your agreements when possible • Create a plan with partners to manage this if it occurs • Follow up with those individuals to be sure they are safe
Circle is generally not going well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult with others for ideas, suggestions, or coaching • Observe another circle • Ask a colleague to co-facilitate with you • Ask participants how to improve the circle