

PEERSPIRIT ~ Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle

Extracts from the book: Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture
(Bantam, 1997, USA) by Christina Baldwin
and additional thoughts from the ongoing work of PeerSpirit, Inc. <http://www.peerspirit.com>
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At this time of global emergency and possibility, we offer these basic guidelines to anyone who wishes to call people into council. Now more than ever, the circle may serve us as a form that honors every voice and invites wisdom into our midst. Now more than ever, the circle offers us a space to courageously listen to each other, speak our truth, and act with clear intention.

We place this document on the world wide web because the circle is a world wide gift. PeerSpirit co-founders, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, have been training facilitators in North America since 1995, and in 2000-2001, through the initiative of From the Four Directions, this methodology was adapted by people in over 37 countries.

Circle process is both simple and complex. Please explore the web site or contact our office for additional information on materials, training, facilitation and consultation. Please honor the lineage of the circle and of PeerSpirit as you use this gift.

The circle, or council, is an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years and has served as the foundation for many cultures. In some areas of the world this tradition is intact, in other societies it has been nearly forgotten. PeerSpirit circling is a modern methodology that calls on this tradition and helps people gather in conversations that fulfill their potential for dialogue, replenishment, and wisdom-based change.

In this sense, the circle offers the process (the way of being together in conversation) and the intention of the group offers the content. A circle among business colleagues and a circle among family members may have similar rituals of opening and closing, but very different content, while a circle of community leaders in Vancouver, Canada and a circle of community leaders in Harare, Zimbabwe may share similar content with very different rituals. Whatever the setting, what makes a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening often referred to as "the sacred space of council."

Though expressed in slightly different ways in different cultures and through different methodologies, the sacred space of council consists of a structure that takes conversation to its depths.

Calling the circle: The role of the host

To start a circle, somebody needs to set an intention (content, mission, or direction), offer basic structure, and be ready to model circle skills while others become accustomed to how a circle works. This person is the caller of the circle, sometimes called the circle host. A circle may be held one time or meet many times over a period of months or years. In ongoing circles, the host role rotates so that responsibility for the group is shared among members.

The components of the circle.

Welcome

Establish center and Check-in

Agreements

Intention

Three Principles and Three Practices

Guardian of process

Check-out and Farewell

Intention:

Intention shapes the circle and determines who will come, how long the circle will meet, and what kinds of outcomes are to be expected. The caller of the circle needs to speak an intention for getting people to the first meeting. Intention may evolve as the circle gathers, but it is very helpful to have an idea that will attract the people the circle needs.

Welcome

Once people have gathered, it is helpful for the host, or any member of the circle, to begin the circle with a gesture that shifts people's attention from social space to council space. This gesture of welcome may be a moment of silence, reading a poem, singing a song, or listening to a musical interlude - whatever gathers people into a sense of calm presence.

Establishing the center

The center of a circle is like the hub of a wheel: all energies pass through it, and it holds the rim together. To help people remember how the hub helps the group, the center of a circle usually holds a few objects that represent the intention of the circle. Any symbol that fits this purpose or adds beauty will serve: flowers, a bowl or basket, a candle. Choose something fairly simple that suits the environment and honors local culture.

Checking-in

Check-in helps people into a frame of mind for council and reminds everyone of their commitment to the expressed intention. It insures that people are truly present in mind as well as in body.

To check-in with a new circle, people may say their names and offer a brief introduction. To check-in with an ongoing circle, people may speak briefly about their hopes for the meeting, or offer other social comment.

Some circles enjoy the tradition of having each person place an object in the center that represents themselves in the meeting. As each person contributes an object (or a thought) to center he/she may tell a brief story about what the object represents and what it means to them to bring it.

Check-in usually starts with a volunteer and proceeds around the circle. If an individual is not ready to speak, the turn is passed and another opportunity is offered after others have completed their check-ins.

Setting circle agreements:

The use of agreements creates an interpersonal container that allows all members to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility of the well-being and direction of the group.

Agreements often used as a basis in PeerSpirit circles include:

The stories or personal material we share in the circle are confidential and will not be repeated without permission.

We listen with compassion, releasing judgment.

We ask each other for what we need and offer what we can.

From time to time we agree to pause to gather our thoughts.

Each ongoing circle will probably want to consider their agreements and spend time phrasing them in their own words and adding to these thoughts.

Three principles:

The circle is not a leaderless group: It is an all leader group. The circle has been called the basic unit of democracy. The structure created by components of the circle becomes a form of self-governance.

Three principles referenced in PeerSpirit work can serve as a foundation for this governance. These principles are:

Leadership rotates among all circle members.

Responsibility is shared for the quality of experience.

People place ultimate reliance on inspiration (or spirit), rather than on any personal agenda.

Three practices:

The primary activity of circle is the interaction of speaking and listening. The three practices of council remind people of the quality of attention that council space invites:

We will speak with intention.

We will listen with attention.

We will tend to the well-being of the circle by remaining aware of our impact and contributions.

Forms of council:

The circle commonly uses three forms of council: talking piece, conversation and reflection.

Talking piece council is often used as part of check-in, check-out, and whenever there is a desire to slow down the conversation, collect all voices and contributions, and be able to speak without interruption.

Talking piece council is described in detail below.

Conversation council is often used to when what is needed is reaction, interaction, and an interjection of new ideas, thoughts and opinions. The energy of open conversation stimulates the free flow of ideas. However, in circle, the agreement to pause and gather thoughts can be very helpful in the midst of conversation council. Attention should be paid to pacing so that no contributions are lost.

Reflection, or Silent council gives each member time and space to reflect on what is occurring, or needs to occur, in the course of a meeting. Silence may be called so that each person can consider the role or impact they are having on the group, or to help the group realign with their intention, or to sit with a question until there is clarity. Depending on the setting and purpose of the circle, people may ask for a period of group silence as way to wait for guidance, take time-out from conversation, or center themselves more deeply.

Guardian

The single most important tool for aiding self-governance and bringing everyone back to center is the role of the guardian. The guardian is a person who volunteers to watch and safeguard group energy.

One circle member at a time volunteers to serve as guardian of the circle's process. The guardian has the group's permission to intercede in group process for the purpose of calling the circle back to center, to focus on the issue or topic, to remind people of respectful practice or agreements, or to suggest a needed break.

The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime or bell or rattle, that is the signal for everyone to stop action, take a breath, rest in a space of silence. Then the guardian makes this signal again and speaks to why he/she called the pause.

The guardian may suggest use of the talking piece, if the conversation has become hurried, jumbled or unproductive.

The guardian may call for time out or a break as needed, watch timeliness, and help people see conflict arising and face it creatively.

It should be noted that anyone can call for a time-out, or ask for the talking piece - but the guardian should be especially looking for these opportunities.

Talking Piece

The talking piece can be any object that passes easily from hand to hand. This may be an object from Nature, such as a stone, stick or feather, or an object that has meaning for a particular circle. Only the person holding the talking piece speaks, and the rest of the circle members listen without interruption.

A talking piece is used whenever there is a desire to move the conversation more slowly so everyone's stories, input or wisdom can be gathered. One member picks up the talking piece, shares his/her thoughts, or story and then passes it on. The talking piece progresses around the circle, either in sequence or by volunteering, until everyone has had an opportunity to contribute. As in check-in, one may pass a turn and then speak after others have spoken.

Farewell/Checkout

At the close of a circle meeting, it is important to allow a few minutes for each person to comment on what they learned, or what stays in their heart and mind as they leave.

Closing the circle by checking out provides a formal end to the meeting, a chance for members to reflect on anything that has transpired, and to pick up objects if they have placed something in the center.

As we shift from council space to social space or private time, we release each other from the intensity of attention being in circle requires.

Circle is not a dogmatic form. There is no one right way or wrong way to practice being together in council. Each group has its own unique set of personalities and style. This structure has proven its strength and adaptability from the first campfires of our ancestors to the global age. Each circle contributes to this long-held human tradition by the practices of listening, speaking, and thoughtful action.

Blessings.

Christina Baldwin, Ann Linnea, many PeerSpirit colleagues and circle hosts of From the Four Directions are wishing you well.

This information is like the bone structure of council, and every circle will embody this structure in its own way. Circle is a dynamic, living form of meeting. To read some of the many applications of this structure, please see the [Newsletter](#) and [Newsletter Archives](#) on the PeerSpirit website.

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