

## Circle Basics

### Purpose

Circle process elicits deep speaking and listening that seems to arise from the form itself—a ring of chairs and a clearly defined purpose—inspiring collective wisdom and action.

**Number of participants:** 3-25

**Typical Duration:** 1-2 hours

**More information:** [www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com)



### Principles and Practices

PeerSpirit Circling suggests three principles:

- Rotate leadership
- Share responsibility
- Rely on group synergy

And three practices:

- Speak intentionally
- Listen attentively
- Tend to the well-being of the group

### Process

Circle begins by *setting the circle space*, including establishing a visual center that represents shared purpose or intention. A *check-in*—each person speaking briefly without comment or interruption—connects people, as they slow down and fully arrive. Often, a talking piece—an object that, when held, reminds the bearer to address the question and reminds everyone else to listen with curiosity—ensures that everyone has a chance to speak without interruption.

When coming together for the first time, circle participants discuss and *commit to group agreements*—often statements defining confidentiality, respectful interaction, and parameters of responsibility. Someone volunteers to act as *host*, leading the topic from within the rim. And someone volunteers to serve as *guardian* of group time and energy. Within this framework, circle members move into the business or intention of the meeting, generally in a *free-flowing conversation*. When the subject is challenging, circle members may choose to reinstate the talking piece to slow the dialogue and stay in a mode of deep listening. Circle is brought to closure with a *check-out*—a talking-piece round to reflect on what has happened and harvest learning.

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## The Steps in Brief

**Setup:** Chairs in a circle, no table

1. Explain the focus of the discussion, stated as a question; e.g., Resilience: what does it mean to me? what does it mean for us? Let people know why the subject is important to you (the host). Let them know what your hopes are for the discussion.
2. Describe the intent of the process:  
The circle as an effective configuration for an open discussion.  
This is about learning from each other. Not debate, not decision making.
3. Introduce 2 ground rules:
  - One person speaks at a time - focus on listening
  - "No Disagree" - spirit of inquiry, hearing many perspectives. If you want to disagree, use it as an opportunity to inquire: "That's interesting perspective. Say more."
4. Check-in. Support an emphasis on listening by passing the "microphone" (otherwise known as a talking stick) to hear from everyone, without interruption.
5. Move to an open the discussion using some questions that are personally meaningful, informed by what comes out of the check-in.
6. For the last 15-20 minutes:  
Use the "microphone" to "check-out" – inviting thoughts on what participants are taking away from the discussion and any thoughts about the process itself



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## Coaching

- **Speak with intention**  
Be guided by your inner voice, speaking only when called. Speak from your own experience (use "I" language).
- **Inquire** into your own or another's perspective. (For example: rather than saying "I disagree," say, "That's an interesting perspective. Why do you say that?") Your purpose is to understand, not to convince.
- **Reflect** on what moves in you when listening to yourself and others. Your purpose is to uncover beliefs and assumptions hidden in the normalcy of culture.
- **Self-monitor impact and contribution**  
Pay attention to the meta-experience. Thinking together engages more than the mind. It is an integral experience, involving head, heart, mind and spirit. Bring all of your senses into sustaining a container that allows the many dimensions of any issue to surface and be known.

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## For More Information

Baldwin, C., & Linnea, A. (2010). *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

*Using images, stories and step-by-step instructions, Baldwin and Linnea teach the basics of circle and explore its deeper meanings. Purpose of the Circle Process: To focus on the power of communication to release the full potential of working groups.*

Bohm, David, *On Dialogue*, Ed. Lee Nichol, New York, Routledge, 1996.

Holman, P., Devane, T., & Cady, S. (2007). [\*The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems\*](#) (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

*Describes sixty-one change methods for engaging whole systems.*

Adapted from Holman, Peggy. (2010). *Engaging Emergence: Turning Upheaval into Opportunity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.