

# **Understanding the Restorative Circle.**

by Sandie Hastings

## **Introduction**

The restorative circle (often referred to as the ‘peacemaking circle’ or ‘circle of support and accountability’) is a communication tool derived from aboriginal and native traditions around the world, where they were considered sacred and essential to community well being. The circle is a process that brings together communities and individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making or other activities in which honest communications, relationship development and community building are core desired outcomes.

Circles offer an alternative to contemporary meeting structures that often rely on hierarchy, win/lose positioning and victim/rescuer approaches to problem solving and relationships. The process is never about ‘changing others’ but rather an invitation to change oneself and one’s relationship with the community. The circle creates a safe and controlled space in which participants, regardless of role, background or status can come together as equals, recognising the need for interdependence in finding common ground on shared issues. Circles can be used to bring people from any community together in conversations in an atmosphere of respect and concern for all, creating trust, intimacy, good will, belonging, mutuality, and reciprocity.

## **The process**

The circle process is ‘simple but not easy’.

There are some key processes that help to define the circle.

The meeting space is the most visible structure. Participants are seated in a circle. The centre of the circle may simply be kept empty, or it could include symbolic objects providing a focal point that may relate to the shared values and purpose of a particular circle. The process is facilitated by fully trained and experienced ‘circle keepers’ who’s impartial and fair manner will ensure that the integrity of the circle is maintained. The number of circle keepers would depend upon the amount of participants although generally a team of two is preferable. A talking piece (usually an object of significance and relevance to the purpose of a particular circle and its participants) is passed from person to person consecutively around the circle and regulates the dialogue. Native tribes would use a sacred stone or feather as a talking piece to ensure respect between speakers and listeners and used ritual to create safety and form. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. They will have the undivided attention of everyone else in the circle and can speak without interruption. In addition to creating a space for people who find it difficult to speak in a group, the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, deeper listening, thoughtful reflection and an unrushed pace. Consensus decision making honours the values and principals of peacemaking circles and helps participants stay grounded in them. All needs are heard and the group commits to addressing them in an agreed manner.

## **Values and Principles**

Circles are best understood in terms of values and principles upon which they operate. Though each circle develops its own values and principles, peacemaking circles generally:

- Are designed by those that use them
- Are guided by a shared vision
- Maintain respect for all
- Call participants to act on their personal values
- Offer everyone an equal and voluntary opportunity to participate
- Take a holistic approach, to include the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual
- Include all interests and are accessible to all
- Invite accountability to others and the process
- Encourage exploring instead of conquering differences.

## **Types of circles**

There are a number of different types of circles each serving different purposes, e.g.

- Talking circles; create an open dialogue about specific topics often including members from fundamentally different places or roles in society
- Restorative Justice circles; work in partnership with criminal justice and the community to address harm caused by offenders and reparation to victims and/or communities
- School based circles; may be used by teachers to address the climate in the classroom, instances of bullying or conflict, or as a ‘teaching’ style
- Healing circles; may be used to heal bonds that have been broken or create new bonds
- Support circles; provide emotional or spiritual support to individuals
- Peacemaking circles; used to build relationships as well as to promote ‘peace’ within a community

## **Stages of the circle**

The four stages of the circle;

### **Stage 1 – Suitability**

When deciding whether or not to use the circle process for a particular community, the following points should be taken into account;

- Is a circle is the most appropriate and suitable process for the situation at hand.
- What the circle goals would be
- The willingness and abilities of potential participants to take part
- Available resources to support a circle (i.e. venue, space, facilitator(s), admin supplies, refreshments)

## **Stage 2 – Preparation (before the circle)**

In the weeks before participants come together for the circle facilitator's work together to prepare others for the circle, always remembering that participation in the circle is an invitation.

Facilitators (or circle 'keepers') should:

- Identify and assess appropriate and relevant parties before inviting participation
- Note their issues, concerns and needs
- Begin to build rapport, relationships and confidence with all participants
- Explain the circle process, the guidelines and the role of the facilitator

Logistics:

Facilitators are responsible for organising a suitable time and a neutral venue that will support all participants in feeling equal and safe. It is important to ensure that participants are willing, and that no pressure has been placed on them to take part in the circle. Facilitators are also responsible for circle materials e.g. flip chart, easel, marker pen, appropriate talking piece and refreshments. Cultural sensitivity and any special needs requirements are the responsibility of the circle facilitator.

## **Stage 3 – During the Circle**

Circle keepers or facilitators are responsible for creating and keeping the 'form' of the circle and ensuring that the talking piece is passed from member to member during sharing 'rounds'. It is important to remember that only the person holding the talking piece speaks and that they may do so as long as they have it in their possession.

Talking pieces should represent something that has a 'special meaning' to the particular group, for example a group of young people may choose a football or a microphone to represent participant's interests in sport or music. It is important that all circles include an opening and closing, and that these two elements are always given time and depth. Circle facilitators act as guides to move the circle through the phases of the circle that it needs to experience. Note that the phases are flexible depending on the purpose for which a circle has been called. The content or topical focus of circles may vary but all circles generally follow four phases, these are as follows;

- Phase one - Introductions
- Phase two - Building Trust
- Phase three – Issues
- Phase four – Solutions

## Phase 1 - Introductions

A balanced introductory circle will create safety and form and begin to prepare participants for deeper sharing and understanding. It should include a warm greeting to everyone and an opportunity for each person to introduce themselves by name, share how they are feeling, why they are here in circle, and what they are hoping for. It is important for the facilitator to remember to acknowledge the courage and commitment required to participate in a circle and also for those who have helped to make the circle happen. With a new group the facilitator should seek consensus and encourage participants to develop guidelines as to how they wish to be together whilst in circle (e.g. respect all opinions, confidentiality etc.) With an ongoing circle the keeper might review the basic circle guidelines at any time, clarify the purpose of the circle, and invite the group to add to or amend the list and to demonstrate their support of what is in effect a 'living document', at any time.

## Phase 2 – Building Trust

In order to increase levels of trust among participants, circle facilitators may guide the circle towards single or multiple rounds of sharing depending on the nature of the circle. Ice breaking activities that are neutral to the purpose of the circle can help participants to get to know one another as people. Personal storytelling rounds relating either directly or indirectly to the circle purpose should also be considered as a powerful way to move beyond masks and appearances and to develop a better understanding of one another.

## Phase 3 – Issues

In this phase the focus expands from what's gone wrong (or what's hurting) to what can be done to make things better, promote healing, or initiate positive change. In circles such as those focussed on healing, listening may be what is most needed – giving people a chance to tell their story and to have it sincerely received. In other circles, however, exploring options can help break the sense of being stuck in either a painful experience or a self-destructive way of life.

## Phase 4 - Solutions

Circles involved in healing or understanding do not require decision making, and the focus of the facilitator may be to work toward creating a sense of unity. In other circles where decision making or conflict resolution are essential outcomes, the facilitator may attempt to build consensus by building on each circle participants input until a decision is reached that all members are at least 'able to live with'. Consensus is about dialogue, listening and honesty, and it means accepting a decision or course of action because it promises the best for everyone given the circumstances. Generating consensus involves patience, creativity, candour in relation to interests and concerns, and a willingness to think 'outside the box'. Facilitators and participants are challenged to put aside personal agenda's and fixed notions about outcomes to enable something to emerge that is larger than any one's preconceived ideas. Reaching decisions by consensus often takes more

time than other methods such as voting, however, the strength of the process is that it's fairness and inclusivity assures that all participants will own and support final decisions.

### **Stage 4 – After the circle (Follow up)**

Follow up is one of the greatest challenges of the successful use of circles and could include the following;

- Where strong emotions are shared in circle, affected individuals should be contacted to see how they are doing and to ensure that they are receiving appropriate support.
- Planning one or more follow up circles if necessary.
- Discussions with people who were not in the circle, but may have relevant information or position to affect issues discussed in circle.
- It is important that someone follows up on individual accountability on specific issues where such agreements have been made in circle.

Although some activities can be delegated to circle participants, it is the overall responsibility of the circle keeper or facilitator to attend to follow up matters.

### **Summary**

This document is in response to a paper written on 13th July 2011 by Professor Rob Canton (DeMontfort University) entitled Disorder and Dispute in Mile 2: Restorative Responses. (The Square Mile Project.) and a follow up meeting with Prof Canton and Dr Jason Panya-Wood, 27th October 2011.

The information contained in this document is adapted by the author from a variety of sources. These include her own experiences of circle training as a Fulbright Scholar with Partners in Restorative Initiatives (PiRi) in Rochester, New York, USA in 2007 and the Circle Keepers Manual (draft) Roca Inc 2004. It outlines some of the best practice principles which should be observed and applied throughout the various stages and processes of a restorative circle.

This paper's relevance to the Square Mile Project is in direct reference to Prof. Canton's summary of that project. In it he suggests that certain restorative processes 'in themselves enhance a sense of collective efficacy – that a community can and should contribute to framing and, in appropriate partnerships with formal agencies, resolve its conflicts'.

Sandie Hastings  
21st December 2011