

## **Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle**

These guidelines are excerpted 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.

Please honor the lineage of the circle and PeerSpirit methodology as you use this gift.

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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 all voices and invites wisdom into our midst. Now more than ever, the circle offers the human community an interpersonal gathering point inside which we may courageously listen to each other, speak our truths, 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. The circle as a global experience, with the ability to remind us of common human values and concerns, continues to expand through this work and other collaborative initiatives.

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.

The circle, or council, is an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years. The circle has served as the foundation for many cultures. In some areas of the world this tradition remains intact, but 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. PeerSpirit and From the Four Directions form a partnership dedicated to global shift through local conversation.

**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 Start-point  
Center and Check-in/Greeting  
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 articulate an intention that will invite 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 or Start-point**

Once people have gathered, it is helpful for the host, or any volunteer participant, 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 invites 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 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, honors local culture, or symbolically represents group intention.

### **Check-in/Greeting**

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 self-introduction. To check-in with an ongoing circle, people may speak briefly about their hopes for the meeting, offer other social comment, or share anecdotal stories about their lives.

Some circles enjoy the tradition of having each person place an object in the center that represents him or herself 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 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:

We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality and honor other material, information or decisions with a level of confidentiality appropriate to the setting.

We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.

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

We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing, and energy. We agree to pause at a signal, and to call for that signal when we feel the need to pause. (This signal may be a chime, bell or rattle, at which sound all action stops, people recenter, the guardian signals again and speaks to the need he/she felt in the group.)

Each ongoing circle will probably want to consider their agreements and spend time phrasing them in their own words and adding agreements that suit their purpose together.

### **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 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.

Three practices of council remind people of the quality of attention that council space invites us:

To speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.

To listen with attention: respectful of the learning process all members of the group.

To tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our 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 all contributions are honored.

*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 before making a decision or taking action.

## **Guardian**

The single most important tool for aiding self-governance and bringing the circle back to intention is the role of the guardian. To provide a guardian, one circle member at a time volunteers to watch and safeguard group energy and observe 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 practices or agreements, or to suggest a rest break.

The guardian usually employs a gentle noise-maker, such as a chime, bell, or rattle, that signals 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 rest 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. When employed in a round of council, only the person holding the talking piece speaks, and other 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.

### **Checkout and Farewell**

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. Often after check-out, the host, guardian, or volunteer will offer a few inspirational words or farewell, or signal a few seconds of silence before the circle is released.

Circle is not a dogmatic form. Each circle will develop its own unique personality and style. The circle 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 through 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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