

# Calling a Circle

A guide for creating a meaningful gathering



These guidelines are offered for anyone who wishes to call people to circle.

Circle traditions provide a slightly more formalized conversation process when people need to speak and listen to one another with more care.

Circle supports organizations, communities, families & friends in moments of decision, growth, transition, & life celebrations.

Circle deepens communication of the heart.

Adapted from The Circle Way:  
A Leader in Every Chair  
by Ann Linnea and Christina Baldwin

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# CIRCLE LIVES IN US

Circle is a timeless way for people to connect, talk, and take action together. Our ancestors gathered around campfires for warmth, safety, food, stories, and to build their communities – and we still use circles for similar reasons today. It's how we socialize, have safe discussions, share stories, build community, and collaborate. Circle helps us find our shared wisdom, discover our true selves in relation to others, and see the valuable contributions we each offer.

Many Indigenous cultures have a circle tradition. Explore connections within your own ancestry if that's available to you. Offer acknowledgement to your own lineage of understanding circle wherever possible.



## INTENTION SETTING

We transform a meeting into a circle with the willingness to shift from opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening. Intention shapes the circle, we come with a purpose, defined by the host. As a host, you build or co-create a direction while leaving room for possibility.

When we gather in circle,  
we invite the best in all of us.

The host of the circle spends time articulating intention and invitation. Who will come, how long the circle will meet, and what kinds of outcomes are to be expected? What questions need to be asked?

## **PRESENCE**

Circle both needs our presence and supports our ability to stay present. Presence is all about having a deeper sense of awareness of your own internal state. Presence allows us to more accurately observe our own behavior and give attention to the emotions and stories that are attached to that behavior. Presence also offers us more choice—the choice to thoughtfully respond to a situation rather than react from a subconscious, patterned place.

The more present you are the more you are able to give your attention to others. We are all navigating complexity and intensity on a daily basis, leaving many of us feeling overwhelmed. When you become disconnected from yourself, your body, your emotions, it's hard to show up with qualities like empathy, patience, compassion, or flexibility. Cultivating presence can help us to show up well in the midst of tension, pressure, and conflict in our rapidly changing world.

## **CIRCLE AGREEMENTS**

Agreements allow us to have a free and profound exchange, to respect a diversity of views, and to share responsibility for the well-being and direction of the group. Try living into these before developing any more agreements for your group.

- We hold all stories or personal anecdotes in confidentiality
- 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 needs, timing & energy
- We agree to pause at a signal when we feel the need to pause

# THREE PRINCIPLES

...that help us practice interdependence, reciprocity, and decentralization

- **Leadership rotates** among all circle members
- Responsibility is shared for the **quality** of experience
- Reliance is on **wholeness**, rather than on any personal agenda



# THREE PRACTICES

...that help us practice presence, humility, and care

- Speak with intention, noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment
- Listen with attention: respectful of the learning process for all members of the group
- Tend to the well being of the circle. Remain aware of the impact of your contributions



# THREE FORMS

...that help us practice intention, adaptation, & relationality

- **Talking piece council** is used whenever there is a desire to slow down the conversation & make space for all voices. It is an invitation to deep listening.
- **Dialogue council** is used when reaction, interaction and an interjection of new ideas, thoughts and opinions are needed.
- **Reflection council** gives each member time and space to reflect on what is occurring, or needs to occur, in the course of a meeting.

# SETTING OUR CENTER

The center of your circle is its focal point, providing a visual anchor for everyone involved. It's like the central hub of a wheel or the magnetic pull of a fire, helping participants connect with the very reason for coming together.

This central space is a powerful symbol of your group's intention. You can make it tangible with relevant objects: an organization might write out their values, a school could display student photos, or a spiritual group might arrange candles and personal items of significance.

Having objects in the middle visually reinforces that there's a shared focus for the conversation. It's important to respect this designated space; for example, avoid stepping on floor displays or cluttering table arrangements with personal items.

A circle isn't a space for imposed vulnerability, nor are we here to be each other's therapists. Instead, it's about building the skill to allow things to rest in the center, trusting that not every shared thought requires an immediate response or a deeper dive. Our aim is to cultivate the ability to hold that space, letting what's offered simply be.



By its simple shape, circle includes everyone without distinction, welcomes and invites all to participate, and creates equality among those gathered.

# ROLES

**Host** - Prepares and holds space for the conversation. Sets the invitation and intention. Over time, hosting should rotate across the members. The host contributes a talking piece for in person circles.

**Guardian** - To ensure the smooth flow and healthy dynamic of the group, one circle member serves as the Guardian. Their role is to observe the group's energy and process, and they can gently signal a pause—often with a soft sound like a bell—inviting everyone to take a breath and rest in silence. The Guardian then clarifies the reason for the pause. This ability to call for a pause is open to any member of the circle.

**Scribe** - Not every circle requires a detailed record of its process, but having a scribe can be invaluable for capturing its essence. This role differs from a traditional minute-taker; the scribe remains a full participant yet adopts a more observational stance to document key aspects.

**Participant** - The most vital role is played by each individual who arrives with presence and a readiness to share responsibility for the entire group. This fundamentally alters the traditional "one-leader-in-a-room" paradigm, fostering an environment where everyone is actively involved in guiding the group forward, embracing ownership, and contributing to its collective purpose.



# ON USING A TALKING PIECE

The talking piece, a tradition in circles for centuries, is an excellent way to cultivate equality among participants. It guarantees that everyone gets a turn to contribute. This simple method helps prevent common disruptions like interrupting, making jokes, giving unsolicited sympathy, or asking diverting questions. You're always welcome to pass the piece if you don't feel ready to speak, but the rule is clear: when someone holds the talking piece, everyone else listens respectfully, without interruption or commentary. Not every conversation needs to be held with a talking piece, but it's an excellent way to heighten attention and slow down interactions, so that circle members really listen to one another.

## CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

# ON SILENCE

Practice the power of the pause. This is where a "circle guardian" steps in (look back at the roles if needed!). When the guardian rings a chime, everything just stops for about 15 seconds – enough time to take three intentional breaths. In that quiet space, you just breathe, and wait. The guardian will ring the bell again to gently signal the end of the silence and briefly explain why they called it. Maybe it's time to stretch, acknowledge something really meaningful that was said, or simply bring everyone back to the present moment and shared contributions. And the best part? Anyone in the circle can ask the guardian to create this pause.

As a host, you'll want to develop your capacity to be comfortable in silence. Most of us aren't naturally comfortable with this, so notice the discomfort that comes up, but trust that some quiet benefits the whole.

# OPENING YOUR CIRCLE

To help people transition from casual conversation to a more focused group dynamic, the host or a volunteer can start with a brief, intentional gesture. This could be a moment of silence, the reading of a poem, or listening to a song—anything that encourages presence.

The host might also invite members to add an item to center. The items signify the presence of each member and a shared purpose. When hosting virtual circles, each member might use their center item as a talking piece.

## CHECK-IN

Check-in helps us begin well, inviting presence and reminding everyone of shared intention. This practice helps ensure participants are fully engaged and fosters connection as stories are shared. Typically, check-in begins with a volunteer and moves around the circle. If someone isn't ready to speak, they can pass, and another opportunity will be offered later. Occasionally, individuals may place objects in the center to symbolize their presence and connection to the intention.

Depending on the group you may want people to share personal details like name, pronouns, and where they are from, but even groups who know each other well should check-in. You might offer something about the length of the check in (usually 1-2 min, or even a word or two for larger groups) and remind folks that there will be more opportunities to share.

Some examples of good check in questions:

- How are you arriving today?
- Why was it important for you to be here today?
- What's the weather? (describe your current self in weather terms!)
- What's something that's inspiring you lately?

# ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions are born from a curious mind and an open heart, always grounded in a deeper story. This story reflects the profound truth that our collective being within a circle is something far greater and distinct from our individual selves. The circle itself offers us the structure and the skills to inhabit this awareness, enabling us to collaboratively make meaning from what is both individual and shared, apparent and hidden.

As you shape your questions, consider: What do you genuinely seek to understand? What narratives do you wish to surface and explore together? Some questions are designed to gather answers, ideas, solutions, guiding our path forward. Perhaps more important are questions that delve into our subjective experience, drawing us closer and fostering a sense of interconnectedness.

The shortest distance between two people is a story.

~ Christina Baldwin

# CHECK-OUT

Check-out is where we honor the journey, witnessing the insights and experiences that have unfolded within the circle, and facilitates a graceful conclusion. As you prepare to depart, each person is invited to share what they've learned or what lingers in their heart and mind. This moment allows everyone to gently unbind from the deep attention that circle demands, easing the transition back into the wider world. Before everyone fully disperses, the host, guardian, or a volunteer often offers a few final words of inspiration, a poem, or song, or signals a quiet pause, sealing our time together. A final bell is often offered.

# BEING CIRCLE

This guide explores both the being and doing of Circle. Our culture often fixates on process and perfection, leading us to "perform" Circle rather than truly embody it. While some good can still come from this approach, the real essence of Circle resides within us. We need to go beyond just thinking; we need to feel for the Circle inside us—the parts longing to be seen and heard, which we've hidden away for fear of judgment. Ultimately, we aim to be Circle, not just do Circle.



To truly learn Circle, we must immerse ourselves in its embrace. It is a living practice of community, where our presence and trust create a container capable of holding all that needs to be expressed. This shifts us out of transactional exchanges, and into relational dynamics where we can show up as whole human beings. When we gather in Circle, we intentionally awaken and invite the best in everyone.

# RESOURCES & SUPPORT

The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair by Christina Baldwin & Ann Linnea

Gifts of Circle: Connection, Courage, Compassionate Action by Tenneson Woolf

Embodied Presence: A Framework & Practices for Reclaiming Our Humanity by Libby Smith, Tiffany Tovey, & Dana Linnell

Please reach out for group trainings, coaching, and circle hosting

A circle is not just a meeting with the chairs rearranged. A circle is a way of doing things differently than we have become accustomed to.

Circle is a way of being, both a return to our original form of community as well as a leap forward to create a new form of community.



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