

The "Talking Stick" Circle

An Ancient Tool For Better Decision Making And Strengthening Community

compiled by George Pór

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"Circle is a mutually-supportive group convened for a specific purpose. It is a gathering held literally in circular form... It is a mechanism of self-empowerment in which leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, and the group relies on Spirit to hold and focus energy." (Calling the Circle, by Christina Baldwin)

"Those who are willing need to step forward in self-authority and balance, and claim their part in creating the change towards wholeness in human affairs." (RainbowHawk and WindEagle, [Ehama Institute](#))

Stepping Forward

Stepping forward is what everyday heroes do when they don't let the pressures of the job override their desire for trustful and caring relationships at the work place.

The vitality and performance of a social organism is largely dependent on the healthy, balanced, and co-creative relationships among its members and stakeholders. Technological and business innovation grows better in relationships of people who have fun working together.

Healthy, balanced, and co-creative relationships at work, are easier said than done. Yet, we all have some experience of them, otherwise we couldn't even imagine how they may be. In times of crisis, or making any decision about complex, multi-stakeholder issues, it is the quality of relationship that, ultimately, decides the outcome.

In those situations the Talking Stick Circle serves as time-proven method to ensure that everybody's voice is heard. Every stakeholder has a piece of the truth; everyone's contribution is needed to make it whole.

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The Circle Is:

- A group process for developing direct, honest, and effective communication in a team or community, using the "circle" as organizing principle.

- A method of collaborative learning built on the ancient wisdom traditions of the Americas.
- A realization of the power of shared minds.
- An experience of a partnership model in action, when the "compete and dominate" models, under the condition of increasing complexity and interdependence, are growing largely ineffective.

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Sitting In Circle

"The American Indian regarded the circle as the principal symbol for understanding life's mysteries, for he observed that it was impressed everywhere throughout Nature. Man looked out on the physical world through the eye, which is circular. The Earth was round, and so were the Sun, Moon and planets. The rising and setting of the Sun followed a circular motion. The seasons formed a circle. Birds build their nests in circles. Animals marked their territories in circles. In the old days, tribes lived in circular homes called tipis and their communities were arranged with the tipis in a circle. Indeed, to the Indian, the whole of life appeared to operate in circular patterns." [1]

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The Circle Provides:

- A framework and tools for using the diversity of views and talents present in the group, to create better decisions *and* strengthen community, by reaching high-level synergy.
- New possibilities for better understanding self, others, and the issues at hand.
- Improved communication and collaboration.
- Better coordination of action due to higher response-ability.

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The Talking Stick Circle Can Help In:

- decision making
- inquiry management
- prioritizing opportunities
- clarifying group dynamics
- team product development
- problem solving
- planning
- conflict resolution
- creating the bonding needed to build learning communities
- or just about anything that organizations use meetings for

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How To Circle

"As in the ancient circles of elders, each Council member comes to know they bring a piece of the truth to the circle - essential in itself, but only a part of the whole. The passion of our personal vision is shared without attachment, and then our position is released to the larger truth of the circle." [2]

In the Circle, a specially chosen object -frequently a "talking stick"- is passed around, and each person in turn speaks his or her truth. "Talking sticks embody the wisdom-heart of their group, and are often artifacts of great beauty, simplicity or significance. They spiritually empower their holder to speak her or his heart-truth as an offering to the group." [5]

"[The stick] should serve as an invitation and encouragement to speak from the most undefended place in one's self." [6]

"Three rules: speak honestly and truthfully from the heart; be brief; and listen attentively." [2]

"Speakers can speak from a deep place without concern that they will be interrupted, criticized or judged. Thus they can be more truthful, creative and less self-conscious... The process is not one of making strong arguments for or against something, or convincing one another of right or wrong, but a process of becoming still and quiet, connecting with greater wisdom. When the truth is spoken on some issue it is seen and heard as such- it rings true'." [3]

"It's listening without reacting or intending to respond, listening without being influenced by long-held images and memories or firmly held position, listening instead with a beginners mind... ." [2]

"Listeners may listen free from the need to construct responses, be intelligent, witty or critical. They are available to take information in and not respond, thus relaxing and opening to the full and true content of the speaker's message." [3]

"This is not to say that all is serious. Wholeness includes all forms of experience, good and bad, light and heavy, joyous and sad, trivial and significant... The group mind wants to see it all; it seeks the whole picture, even when the parts that show up don't seem to hang together... Everything is an invitation to look deeper,sense more fully. The power lies in our seeing and feeling exactly what is, and suspending the noisy internal and external responses that get in the way of that... There's no right and wrong way to do this. There are only honest efforts to hear, see and say what is most real at any given moment." [5]

Developing competence in holding Circle around relatively simpler issues, pays off when the issues are hot, complex, requiring immediate attention, and it's challenging to rapidly grow listening/speaking discipline necessary to its success.

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Circle Facilitation

Whether with humor, the weaving of words, or silence, strong leaders stay present and committed to what is actually taking place, rather than invested in the Circle being "successful"... a truly successful Circle is an authentic one, no matter how dark or unresolved the outcome.

Good facilitation is usually "transparent," in the sense that members leave the Circle less impressed with the wisdom and power of the facilitator(s) than with a strong feeling of the movement and interconnectedness of the whole circle.

There are times when the talking stick doesn't go in round, but to the center, when somebody has spoken. Whenever another member of the circle feels moved to speak, s/he picks up the stick again.

"As members of a group talk, only one will have the most powerful idea at anyone time. If they are alert, the others in the group can feel who is about to speak, and then can consciously focus their energy on this person, helping to bring out his idea with the greatest clarity... . The key to this process is to speak up when it is your moment and to project energy when it is someone else's time." [4]

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References

1. The Medicine Way, by Ken Meadows,
2. Council, by Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, in Utne Reader, 1991
3. Speaking from the Heart, with the Talking Stick by H. Schechter and L. Faithorn, in Vision -Action, Journal of the Bay Area OD Network, December 1987
4. Celestine Prophecy, by James Redfield
5. Simplest Talking Circle Instructions, by Tom Atlee (personal communication)
6. Using a Talking Stick, by Joseph Jastrab, *Wingspan: Journal of Male Spirit*, April/June 1991)

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Educational Resources

Ehama Institute

The Ehama Institute For Self Knowledge & Earth Wisdom Teachings is a rich source of deeper knowledge in circle matters. Its Council Teachings series of ceremonies is a unique form of transmitting an ancient body of information that goes beyond the subject of this article. For information, call 408-282-4537 or write to [Ehama Institute](#), 31440 Loma Prieta Way, Los Gatos, CA 95030 USA.

Ojai Foundation

There's a training of council facilitators in Ojai. Many of the ideas quoted in this briefing are from Council professionals in Ojai. An instruction booklet and a video tape are also available. For information, call: 805-646-8343

PeerSpirit

"Calling for Change is a training session in circle and council skills designed to be used by groups in business, civic organizations, churches, temples, schools, and private settings." PeerSpirit, the group offering this training can be reached at 206-321-8404.

Online Circles

There are a number of groups in cyberspace that have experimented with "online circles." The pioneers of combining spirit and technology are Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz of Awakening Technology. For information, send e-mail to p+t@awaken.com.

Community Intelligence Labs offers training and coaching for online circle facilitators in the corporate world. For information, send e-mail to [George Pór](#).

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Books

Calling the Circle: the First and Future Culture, by Christina Baldwin, Swan*Raven & Co, 1994

The Ceremonial Circle, by Sedona Cahill and Joshua Halpern, Harper 1990

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