



TIMELESS TRADITIONS: CONDUCTING COUNCIL CIRCLES IN A MODERN WORLD

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Timeless Traditions: Conducting Council Circles in a Modern World

Councils, or talking circles, have long been valued by indigenous cultures as the practice for building community and consensus, making decisions, and recognizing the significance of relationships. A Council Circle is a formalized structure of communication that has many modern progeny, including classroom management strategies, civil dialogue forums, and therapy. Frequently, non-indigenous Council Circles in North America pay homage to the tribal origins of the practice. Several native tribes continue to teach and provide insight into these forms of communication and governance. This paper (the first of a series) will briefly highlight the differences between Eurocentric and indigenous communication and then provide experienced facilitators with some of the traditional structures inherent in circles. Resources are identified in the cited references.

How Communities Approach Issues

Transformational leadership styles acknowledge that the maintenance of group function is important for goal attainment, particularly when members participate in ongoing relationships that may involve multiple successes and failures for the group (VanderWey et al. 2014). If a group is going to be working together for an extended period of time on multiple goals, their relationships will become a determining factor in their output. Effective leadership includes giving groups the opportunity to self-determine effective internal and developmental leadership dynamics (VanderWey et al. 2014).

There are significant differences in the approaches of contemporary Eurocentric decision-making and indigenous decision-making. These differences are based on what could be understood as the “location of the solution.” In Eurocentric traditions, objective (research-based) decisions are made through argumentation and experimentation. In research, this frequently involves intentionally stripping subjects of personal identifiers in order to reduce subjective biases and prove that solutions are generalizable.

This approach is summarized in the expression “what is good for many must be good for all.”

Council Circle decision-making and problem-solving is based on seeking consensus through subjective experience. Circle decisions place a greater emphasis on the understanding and consensus of personal experience. Individual points of view are respected and necessary. Experiences can then inform meaningful solutions. Councils often begin problem-solving by listening to people. Institutional cultures, on the other hand, often see problems as generalizable, the solutions provided in terms of programs and products that have been vetted by professionals who may or may not have any relation to the immediate issue. Cultures that value immediacy and interpersonal relevance may reject packaged solutions as culturally irrelevant. To the extent personal relationships mediate solutions, attempting to implement research-based interventions without relationships will likely prove counter-productive. Circle practices can help groups mediate differences and understand viewpoints before tackling issues. Initial issues may not need further resolution if simply recognizing and accepting differences offers a solution. Circle practices often uncover people’s innate desire for communication and relationship. A circle helps individuals understand their differences and celebrate their similarities.

Zimmerman and Coyle point out in their book *The Way of Council* (2009), “Council is far more focused on synthesis than analysis.” Institutionalization of any practice tends to move participants away from personalization even though individuals have innate drives for autonomy and belonging (Sokol et al. 2013). Systems that wish to predict outcomes of communities would benefit by first attending to the innate individual drives mediating group cohesion. Concepts such as efficiency and effectiveness are part of a production-orientated and institutional mindset. Transformational leadership asserts that efficiency only comes after a group has identified

their norms (VanderWey et al. 2014), and norms are generated through the respect of individual similarities and differences. A Council Circle moves participants towards effectiveness by generating enlarged opportunities for authentic self-expression and mutual care. The outcomes of circles cannot be forced or predicted, because they require personal investment that individuals must generate authentically.

Rupert Ross in his book, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (2006), advises against the “instant pudding” approach to council, stating that “So much more needs to be done than simply locating a dozen interested people, adding money and stirring in a few ceremonies.” Many prevention and experiential education curricula are more successful when time is allowed to gather groups for norming before moving forward with objectives. The synergistic processes inherent to circle practice contribute to communal potentials, such as consensus-building, group cohesion, and problem-solving.

Secular Considerations:

As mentioned earlier, there are many forms of circles serving a wide variety of purposes (Graham and Henson 2015). It is important to recognize that there may be ceremonial and sacred components of indigenous circles that belong to the cultures through which they have originated, and these components should not be appropriated. More secular approaches to using circle practices may attempt to move away from the traditional structures that hint of spiritual dimensions. In its indigenous origins, the spiritual is inseparable from our experience. By fostering attentive listening and authentic expression, circles build positive relationships between participants and neutralize hierarchical dynamics formed by the inequalities inherent to status, race, or other social factors, (which might include non-secular differences.) Within the structure of a Council Circle, participants can build a deep sense of community and foster a recognition of shared humanity and interconnectedness. Circles enable individuals to give voice to their values, develop mutual respect, cultivate compassionate responses to anger, defensiveness, and violence, and they can help strengthen the emotional health and resilience

of their participants (CCMS 2015). Circles can recognize that spirituality is a fundamental dimension of human existence for many, while remaining non-denominational, relatively secular, and respectful of differences.

Basic Process of Council Circles

“A question is asked, or an issue is raised, and then, going around the circle, each person takes a turn speaking to it. Everyone is free to speak as long as they wish, or not at all. The choice is theirs and no one will interrupt or show impatience. No one speaks until their turn, and everyone concludes their turn by saying thank you to the circle for the chance to contribute” (Ross 2006).

Intentions

There are a few basic intentions each participant is asked to practice when participating in a Council Circle:

Listen with the Heart: Listening from the heart means listening with an open, non-judgmental mind and a receptive heart, “letting go of stories that make it hard to hear each other” (Clifford 2013).

Speak from the Heart: Speak from experience, speak from personal feelings, and speak your truth.

Speak Spontaneously: Avoid conversationally responding or rehearsing what to say. Listen to each speaker. Many thoughts and emotions may arise as people share. When the talking piece arrives, then speak spontaneously.

Speak Leanly: No one is required to speak. Contributions, however, should be to the point. Share speaking time in the circle equally.

While “heart-to-heart conversations” may sound metaphorical or cliché, there are theories and physiological evidence that people do have a physical capacity to interpret social cues through the polyvagal (para-sympathetic) nerves attached to the heart and other visceral organs. Our empathetic responses to one another’s facial and non-verbal cues can escalate or de-escalate conflict (Porges 2017). In our fast-paced society, intentionally bringing participants into a shared space, to slow down, and to experience each other’s thoughts and feelings may

result in greater empathy and a chance for healing and personal transformation.

Traditional Structures

In order to support the circle process, there are a few traditional structures that are very helpful. These structures create the “safe space” individuals require to be open and authentic. Amos Clifford’s, *Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles* (2013) can provide excellent and more in-depth examples of any of the practices outlined below.

The Circle Keeper: One or two participants in the circle are considered “Circle Keepers.” While still active participants of the circle, the Keepers provide the structure: the opening ceremony, possibly the initial questions of sharing, gentle guidance to be mindful of the intentions of circle, reminders of any predetermined structures, and the closure ceremony. The Circle Keeper is not in an authoritative or authoritarian role. They do not judge what does, or does not, belong in the circle. They do have the responsibility to end the circle if participants fail to hold to the intentions.

Ceremonial Openings and Closings: Many organizations initiate ceremony with ritual, for example, singing an anthem, saying a prayer, or reciting a pledge. A challenge of many ritualized ceremonies is that over time they can lose their authenticity for the participants. An authentic ceremony offers participants the opportunity to focus their attention into the present by engaging the participant’s own symbolic imagination. It is extremely important that time is taken to recognize that what members choose share in a circle is authentic or “sacred.” What is sacred deserves complete attention. As a general rule, what is said in a council should be considered confidential. Individuals are being encouraged to share their stories, to reveal or discover *why* they think and feel things, not to debate a position. No one’s experience is wrong. Ceremonies communicate experiential significance, letting participants “sink in” to the realization the circle is for them, and from them, not something controlling them or that needs to be controlled. Ceremonies are intended to invoke a safe space. Circles are closed with gratitude: gratitude for

the opportunity to share and gratitude that others have also chosen to share.

Check-In: Many Circle Keepers prefer to start with a “check-in” after the opening ceremony. This honors the wholeness of the participants by acknowledging that many participants may be carrying recent experiences that could make being fully present difficult. Dissociation is frequently a fact of life for most people attending to their institutional roles. A check-in gives participants a chance to let everyone else in the circle know about their current circumstances and disposition. Like the ceremonial opening, it is another way of helping people move into authenticity, sacredness, and safety. It is a “wave-length adjustment” (Ross 2006) and the calming regulation of parasympathetic nerve responses (Porges 2017).

The Talking Piece: The talking piece is usually a single object that people pass around the circle. Only when someone is holding the talking piece will they be speaking. Everyone else is listening deeply to what is being said. Individuals are not required to speak, they may simply hold the talking piece and then pass it to the next person in the circle. Requiring that more talkative or assertive participants wait to speak has many social and emotional benefits to the individuals in the group and to the depth of the discussion. The traditional circle passes the talking piece clockwise, from person to person.

Center Piece: The Circle Keepers may provide a center piece that can contain small items of personal value for themselves and other members of the circle. As a shared center, the center piece represents the strength of shared experience. In native traditions, the centerpiece is intended to represent the four directions which make up the circle of life, the natural world and the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of being. The center piece, like the talking piece, is also helpful for mitigating assertive eye contact and self-consciousness. By redirecting the focus away from other people’s reactions and more deeply into the center, some participants may feel more comfortable about disclosing personal experiences.

The Size of a Circle: In general, the ability to maintain the intentions of Council requires practice. Larger groups may strain the patience of some younger members. More experienced participants may be able to sustain a larger number of people contributing to the circle for longer periods of time. In order to move from collective ceremony, through check-in and then provide opportunities for participants to engage deeply in the process, groups of about a dozen are ideal. Clifford (2013) provides useful alternative circle structures for classroom-sized groups.

Conclusion: Meeting in Modern Times

Council Circle communication is an ancient practice. It is easy to imagine many modern communication techniques that emerged from this practice. The humanizing effects of council require time and personal commitment. This tends to be the issue that modern organizations and people struggle with the most. It stands to reason that Council Circles hold some answers to what institutionalized management systems have voided. Institutional efficiency is about “time on task,” and individual concerns have become inefficient. Unfortunately, human validation is not something that can be penciled in between the board meeting and an aerobics class. American culture appears to have bought into an identity of busyness and consumerism, which has been attributed to systemic societal anxiety (Dunnewold 2007). Over-worked and under-valued people often fail to acknowledge anything is amiss, until they take the time to tune into themselves. Council Circles can not only help communities find cohesion, they can guide individuals towards deeper self-recognition and healing. Communities must coalesce with the earnest belief that “we are all worth the time.”

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