Human Systems Talking Circles

What Is a Human Systems Talking Circle?

A Talking Circle is a group of people in an organization who regularly come together to contribute their experience and perspective, as well as gain knowledge and wisdom from the whole group for the benefit of the organization. The Human Systems Talking Circle format is based on a blend of models from 12-step programs, Quaker meetings, Native American groups, and consensus-based discussion guidelines.

The purpose of a Talking Circle is primarily to build empathy and trust among group members. Increased empathy and trust reduce unnecessary organizational and relational conflict and make conflict management and resolution practices more effective. Strong empathy and trust among members of an organization may also increase social support, which decreases levels of occupational stress and burnout.[1]

Talking Circle groups build trust and empathy when members improve their non-judgmental listening skills and learn how to give feedback clearly and kindly. Talking Circles embody the Human Systems principle "*The truth lies in the combined perspective and experiences of all stakeholders.*" Allowing organizational members to speak about their experience from their perspective in a safe space, without fear of judgement or retribution, allows a fuller understanding of organizational challenges. This collective perspective will contribute to a healthier, more successful organization.

How Does a Talking Circle Work?

Each person in the Talking Circle has an opportunity to speak on a pre-selected topic for a specified amount of time according to **Talking Circle guidelines**:

- **Speak one at a time.** When one person is speaking, they have the floor until their time is up; then the next person may speak.
- **Speak from first-person perspective only.** When speaking, each person talks only about their own experience, and does not speculate or make assumptions about what others are doing, thinking, or saying.
- **No crosstalk.** Crosstalk is commenting on another's contribution either through speech or gesture. The Talking Circle is not a discussion, but an opportunity for each person to speak their truth. If the session is virtual, no side chatting – that is also considered crosstalk.

Talking Circle Process

1. **We start on time.** When you start on time, you send a message of consistency, safety, and respect to participants. Sometimes people will be late, and that's okay.

2. The facilitator opens the meeting by asking for volunteers to read the Talking Circle guidelines and principles.

3. Housekeeping announcements.

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[1] Stensland & Landsman, 2017.

Rev. 7.13.2021 by Dr. S. Colby Peters

4. The **Topic Group** shares the topic or question for that session. The **Facilitator** records the topic.

5. The **Facilitator** announces time limits and the sharing format (popcorn, raise virtual hand, chain, calling on participants, other).

6. The **Timekeeper** announces timekeeping format.

7. As participants contribute,

   a. the **Coach** helps the group adhere to Talking Circle guidelines.
   b. the **Facilitator** keeps track of who has shared and passed.
   c. the **Timekeeper** times each contribution and lets the speaker know when their time has concluded. During coaching, the Timekeeper will pause the time and resume when the participant says they are ready.

8. Participants who choose to can share one word or phrase that summarizes their experience and feelings about the session.

9. Choose volunteers to fill the roles, which include **Coach**, **Facilitator**, **Timekeeper**, and **Topic Group**.
   a. **Coach**: Ensures that speakers adhere to Talking Circle guidelines, particularly speaking from first-person perspective and avoiding crosstalk.
   b. **Facilitator**: Makes sure that readings are completed; determines time limits; keeps track of attendance, sharing and volunteer positions; makes sure that everybody has an opportunity to contribute; and keeps the session moving.
   c. **Timekeeper**: Keeps time for each contribution, letting the speaker know when their time is up.
   d. **Topic Group**: Three members who take the time prior to the start of a Talking Circle to select the topic or question for the session. The Topic Group must have members from both DHHS and MCPS.

10. When everybody has had an opportunity to contribute, the **Facilitator** closes the contribution portion of the session by asking for a volunteer to read the Closing. The group fills the Talking Circle roles for the next session. The new **Facilitator** keeps track of who has volunteered for each role.

Creating a Safe Space

Talking Circle sessions are most effective when everybody feels safe to contribute honestly and openly without fear of judgment or retribution. The following guidelines, for which the group is collectively responsible for enforcing, ensure that your Talking Circle sessions are safe.

- **Be kind and respect your own and others' vulnerability.** Talking Circle participants must be careful not to discuss the specifics of what was said and by whom outside of the sessions. If a participant has comments or concerns about a contribution, they need to discuss it directly with the participant who made the contribution – this

should be done with respect and kindness. First, ask the participant if they would feel comfortable talking about their contribution in the session. The participant is free to say "no". If they say "yes", determine a safe space and time that works for both parties. Before you conclude the discussion, both parties should agree on confidentiality parameters and any action items.

- **Maintain a beginner's mind.** You probably won't agree with everything that is said in the Talking Circle. Participants may say things that even seem to run counter to your own values or principles. Part of what makes a Talking Circle powerful and healing is the members' unconditional acceptance of every other member as a fellow human being. We do not make judgments about the person based on what they say. If we don't agree, we can let it go. If we have a strong reaction, it may be useful to explore the reasons why we are having the reaction.

- **Maintain a healthy personal filter.** Everybody has a different experience and perspective – that's what makes Talking Circle sessions so powerful. You may not like everybody's contribution and that's okay – what a member says is about *their* perspective and experience, not you. If you don't like something that was said, you can let it go, or perhaps even think through why it upsets you – maybe there is something to learn.

- **Be aware of power differentials outside of Talking Circle sessions.** It is likely that participants in Talking Circle sessions will have different amounts of informal and formal power in an organization. Those with more power need to be especially aware of their power and not make decisions or take action that could negatively affect others based on information gained in Talking Circles. When in doubt, participants should discuss their concerns directly with the individual(s) (*see "Creating a Safe Space": "Be Kind and Respect Your Own and Others' Vulnerability" section above*) who shared the information and be aware that trust and empathy in a Talking Circle is hard to build and easy to dismantle. Conversations about the wellbeing of individuals and relationships are appropriate; conversations about individual or group work performance are not appropriate.

Talking Circle Principles

After much research on best leadership and organizational development practices, as well as extensive experience in group and organizational processes, Dr. S. Colby Peters developed the following principles that guide the Human Systems approach to improving organizational health. These principles can also be used to guide the contributions of participants in Talking Circles.

- *Everybody is doing the best they can with what they have and what they know.*
- *The best way forward moves us toward what we want, not away from what we fear.*
- *A challenge is best solved by the person or group most affected.*
- *The truth lies in the combined perspective of all stakeholders.*
- *Purposefully aligning behaviors, values, and principles allows effective leadership to emerge.*

What Makes a Good Contribution?

An effective contribution stays on topic, is honest, clear, organized, follows Talking Circle guidelines, and embodies Talking Circle principles. Generally, a good contribution has four parts:

1. **Challenge**. Describe a challenge you experience based on the topic for the session.
2. **Experience**. Describe your experience around the challenge – what it's like for you and how you manage it.
3. **Principle, guideline, or skill**. Think about a principle, skill, or guideline you use, could use, or are working on to guide your behavior so you can improve your experience.
4. **Action**. Based on your principle, guideline, or skill, how do you address the challenge, or how might you address the challenge?

It is suggested that contributions follow this format because it encourages members and the group to focus on strengths and positive change, instead of dwelling on uncomfortable feelings or circumstances. If you do not know what to say after you describe the challenge and your experience, that's okay – we don't always know the answer.

> **Option to pass.** If a member does not feel compelled to contribute at that time, they may pass. Participants do not have to use their entire speaking time and may opt to just share a feeling or emotion word. Click here to see Human Systems Emotion Wheels.

Closing the Talking Circle

The core of a Talking Circle's effectiveness is trust and safety among participants. Each participant can maintain the trust and safety in the Talking Circle by keeping today's contributions inside the circle and not discussing what was said here outside of the session. In this way, we choose to honor participants' courageousness in being vulnerable, which contributes to the health of professional relationships and the organization as a whole.

If you chose to make yourself vulnerable in the session, consider taking some time for self-care before jumping back into professional tasks and projects.

Additional Process Notes

What Makes a Good Topic? Dr. Peters suggests that the topic be a challenge that meets the following criteria:

1) Has been going on for a while (is consistently happening);
2) Everybody in the topic group has been touched by the challenge (notices the effects, feels frustrated);
3) Everybody in the topic group feels partially responsible for the outcome;
4) Seems to negatively affect the productivity, effectiveness, or wellbeing of employees AND/OR seems to negatively affect client outcomes.

Attendance at Talking Circles
Regular attendance at scheduled Talking Circles is critical for creating a safe space and maximizing Talking Circle benefits for all stakeholders.

In some cases, participants may be able to attend part, but not the whole, session. In general, the participant decides what is best for them and best for the group when making a decision about whether to attend part of a session. Some guidelines to consider when making a decision:

- *If you need to leave early,*
    - o Let people know in the chat at the beginning of the meeting (if possible) that you need to leave and when you will be leaving so the group is not concerned.
    - o When you leave, do so without disrupting the group.
    - o Keep in mind that closing statements about confidentiality still apply.
- *If you need to arrive late,*
    - o Review the guidelines in the Talking Circle manual before joining the meeting so that you are in the right frame of mind.
    - o When you join the group, do not disrupt the session in progress. You may request the topic for that session using the chat.
- *If you are going to miss most of the session, especially if you are arriving late, consider not attending so as to not disrupt the group and the integrity of the space.*