

TALKING CIRCLES

Talking Piece: Generally, an item or object (e.g. rock, feather, stick) is used as the talking piece and passed to facilitate and share speaking time in the circle.

- Object with significance to group or individuals
- Helps to create focused/sacred space
- Encourages the use of silence
- People can pass or create a time of silence
- Keeper can hold the piece for open discussion

Role of Keeper

- Trained facilitator
- Does opening sequence, helps make circle a safe place by reminding of values, purpose & guidelines
- Poses discussion questions & issues
- Acknowledges comments, summarizes, highlights concerns or points raised, refocuses discussion
- Closing sequence

General Circle Guidelines:

- The talking piece moves clockwise around the circle.
- One cannot speak unless holding the talking piece, except with permission of the Circle Keeper.
- When the talking piece comes to a person s/he can pass it without speaking.
- One cannot "dump and run" - speak and then leave the circle before it is done.
- The talking piece gets passed around and around until everyone has had their say, and no decision is made until then.

Honoring the Circle:

Honor the purpose of the circle and those in it by speaking:

- from the heart, honestly and openly
- with respect for self & others
- to the issue/topic in the circle
- briefly enough so that everyone will have time to speak

Process:

The Keeper does an opening ritual: a reading of a quote, poem or prayer. Then the keeper poses the question or issue to be addressed in the circle and passes the talking piece to the person on the left. Once the talking piece goes around the circle and comes back to the Keeper, the Keeper may: summarize what people have been saying and raise potential questions to address before passing the talking piece around again; summarize what people have been saying and hold the talking piece to open up the circle for anyone to speak; hold the talking piece and call on specific people to clarify certain issues; or pass the talking piece to someone else to facilitate an open circle discussion on a key issue.

The advantages of using a talking piece include:

- greater opportunity for listening and reflection: since a person has to wait for the

talking piece to come around before speaking there is more focus on what people are saying than on preparing an immediate response.

- prevention of one on one debates since people cannot respond out of turn.
- shared responsibility -- for the discussion and for the peacemaking -- among all the circle members.
- use of a talking piece reinforces the principle of equality in the circle: equal opportunity for all to participate and equal capacity of all to contribute.
- more opportunity for quiet people to be heard in the discussion; the talking piece gives them time to speak without having to compete with the more verbal people.
- promotion of consensus: all people are heard from and all issues are aired before any decision is made by the circle.

Benefits of Using Talking Circle Process

- Spreads responsibility to all participants
- Creates safe space to talk about issues
- Promotes empathy
- Creates a sense of belonging
- Increases group cohesiveness and community

Tips for Handling Problem Behaviors:

- Listen for what person needs (to be heard, etc.)
- Involve participant in the process, (e.g., have them pick the talking piece, reading, have them do the opening reading)
- Affirm person as circle member while reminding about the topic on the floor, purpose of this circle, values of circle
- Do prevention by getting people trained in circles and by using opening ritual each time to reinforce circle values
- Trust the circle to take care of it

Sources: Minnesota Department of Corrections Restorative Justice Initiative - 9/98. Excerpted in part, with permission, from Building Community Justice Partnerships: Community Peacemaking Circles, by Barry Stuart (1997: Aboriginal Justice Learning Network, Department of Justice, Canada.)

Updated August 2003 Compiled by Paula Schaefer email: PaulaSchf@aol.com