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# Facilitator's Handbook

*Resources for facilitating community circle discussions*

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# A note to facilitators

Welcome and thank you for joining this community circle project. Your time and commitment are very valuable contributions to the success of this project.

The materials in this handbook have been developed as suggested reference tools to help you monitor and facilitate your circle discussion. Many of these materials have been adapted from other sources. You are welcome to photocopy whatever you would like from this handbook to share with your group.

Again, many thanks for all your hard work. We hope this handbook provides you with some guidelines for a productive and provocative community circle.

# WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CIRCLE?

## A community circle IS:

- a small group discussion involving deliberation and problem solving examined from many perspectives with the help of the members' knowledge and experience. This discussion is often informed by research data and discussion materials, and aided by a facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

## A community circle IS NOT the same as:

- **a focus group,** a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Participants are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or group at a focus group.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome,** a meeting such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. *A community circle begins with a shared interest among its members. The dialogue unfolds as the process progresses and is partly guided by its members.*

- **a town meeting,** an official governance process or a large-group meeting drawing attention to a issue.

- **a public hearing,** a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

- **a class,** with teachers and pupils, where the teacher or the expert imparts knowledge to students.

# A Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
  *Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.*

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
  *In debate, winning is the goal.*

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
  *In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.*

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
  *Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.*

Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
  *Debate defends assumptions as truth.*

Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
  *Debate causes critique of the other position.*

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
  *Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.*

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
  *Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.*

In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
  *In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.*

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
  *Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.*

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
  *In debate, one searches for glaring differences.*

In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.
  *In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions.*

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
  *Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.*

Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
  *Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.*

Dialogue remains open-ended.
  *Debate implies a conclusion.*

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*Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).*

# The Role of Facilitators

- Remain neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.

- Help the group set its ground rules, and keep to them.

- Help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.

- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

- Bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.

- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.

- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.

- Summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

- Remain objective, monitor process and guide rather than actively participating in the dialogue.

## AND

- Become self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.

- Put the group first.

- Develop a passion for group process with its never-ending variety.

- Appreciate all kinds of people.

- Show commitment to democratic principles.

# The Role of Participants

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.

- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.

- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

# Suggestions for
# Discussion Guidelines

- Everyone gets a fair hearing.

- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

- Share "air time."

- If you are offended, say so; and say why.

- You can disagree, but don't personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.

- Speak for yourself, not for others.

# Tips for Effective Facilitation

### Be Prepared
The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

### Set a Relaxed and Open Tone
♦ Welcome everyone and create a friendly relaxed atmosphere.

♦ Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

### Establish clear discussion guidelines
At the beginning of the community circle, help the group establish its own discussion guidelines by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. (See page 8 for sample guidelines.)

### Monitor and Assist the Group Process
♦ Keep track of how the group members are participating - who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

♦ Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.

♦ When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.

♦ Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.

♦ Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.

♦ Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

♦ Remember: a community circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

### *Help the Group Grapple with the Content*

♦ Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.

♦ Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.

♦ Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.

♦ Help participants to identify "common ground", but don't try to force consensus.

### *Use Probing Comments and Open-ended Questions Which Don't Lead to Yes or No Answers.*

This will result in a more productive discussion. Some useful questions include:

♦ What seems to be the key point here?

♦ What is the crux of your disagreement?

♦ What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?

♦ Please give an example, or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.

♦ Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?

♦ What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?

♦ What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?

♦ What would be a strong case against what you just said?

♦ What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?

♦ What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

♦ What have we missed that we need to talk about?

♦ What information supports that point of view?

### *Reserve Adequate Time for Closing the Discussion*

♦ Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.

♦ Thank everyone for their contributions.

♦ Make any necessary announcements.

♦ Give a quick overview of the next session.

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# Suggestions for
# Dealing with Typical Challenges

Most community circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that community circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

*Problem:*

**Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.**

**Possible responses:** Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact - it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a community circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the community circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

*Problem:*

**An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.**

**Possible responses:** As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you *must* intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate - "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice - you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

*Problem:*

**Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.**

**Possible responses:** Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

*Problem:*

**Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts, but no one present knows the answer.**

**Possible responses:** Ask, "Has anyone heard conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

*Problem:*

**Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.**

**Possible responses:** This rarely happens in community circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

*Problem:*

**Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.**

**Possible responses:** If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a community circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue; it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

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# Community Circle Report Form
*Sessions #1-4*

*Sponsoring Organization:* _____ *Date:* _____

*Session:* ___#1 ___#2 ___#3 ___#4      *Number of Participants (today):* _____

*Facilitator:* _____ *Co-Facilitator (if any)* _____

*Scribe:* _____

**************************************************************************

**Please describe two or three main themes/ideas which your group discussed today:** *(1-2 sentences each)*

1. _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

4. **Please use this space to note action ideas, if any, that were mentioned in today's discussion:**

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

# Community Circle Report Form
## *Session #5*

*Sponsoring Organization:* _____ *Date:* _____

*Session:* ___#1 ___#2 ___#3 ___#4     *Number of Participants (today):* _____

*Facilitator:* _____ *Co-Facilitator (if any)* _____

*Scribe:* _____

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While there may not be consensus within your group about how to best address some of the challenges discussed, there may be ideas or solutions which have emerged over the last few weeks and are supported by most participants.

**What are two or three of the most powerful steps our community could take to address the challenges discussed?** (These may range from individual efforts to large-scale initiatives, and may address one or many of the issues discussed.)

1. _____
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   _____

2. _____
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3. _____
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4. **What are some of the things participants said they would do differently in the future as a result of being part of this community circle dialogue?**

_____
_____
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_____
_____