



Talking Circle: A Directed Conversation

What is a Talking Circle? Talking Circles take their genesis from the indigenous people of North America, particularly tribes in the Midwest. Circle processes are based upon equality between participants; underlying every Circle is the goal of restoring the participants to a place of harmony and understanding. Circles utilize a “talking stick,” which regulates the flow of communication; only the person holding the talking stick may speak. Participants are directed to respond to a series of prompts created by Ellie Krug in consultation with the client/sponsor—the goal is to have prompts that will elicit information that otherwise might not come about in the absence of a Circle.

It’s important to note that a Talking Circle *is not* a gripe or complaint session. The use of prompts and Ellie’s skillset ensure that the conversation stays focused and productive. On the other hand, a degree of human vulnerability is often present throughout the Circle process; in fact, a Circle can embody the lesson that vulnerability draws humans closer (see Brene Brown https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability). Further, a Circle requires both speaking and listening; mutual understanding is impossible without each.

If done right, a Circle creates a safe, non-judgmental place where each participant can contribute to the discussion of difficult and/or important issues. The intent is to provide a safe place for connection and dialogue where all participants are open to being influenced by what happens during the process and do not enter the process hoping to persuade others or expecting a specific outcome. Respecting the talking stick equalizes the opportunity to contribute and be heard. In many ways, a Circle embodies one of the key learning goals from Ellie’s Gray Area Thinking® human inclusivity training: that each of us wants to be “seen” as someone of value and who matters.

How Ellie’s Talking Circles Work: Every Circle begins with Ellie setting forth various ground rules, including that participants may share what they want, can remain silent during their turn, or pass by giving the talking stick to the next person. Other ground rules include that the Circle is a “judgment free zone,” thus mandating that the organization/sponsor may not engage in retribution for what is shared in the Circle. (Throughout the Circle process, respectful comments are mandatory.) Another ground rule is “no festering”; if a participant says something that triggers another participant in some way, the expectation is that this will be brought up in the Circle when the offended participant has the talking stick. Otherwise, Ellie lays out ways to avoid “festering” outside the Circle process.

Following an explanation of ground rules, Ellie begins by reading the first of a series of prompts. Participants are asked to write a five to fifteen-word response to the prompt on an index card. (The reason for this is to capture each participant’s thoughts before they may be influenced by what others have to say in the Circle process.) Participants then

throw the cards into the middle of the Circle. Thereafter, the talking stick is given to the first participant and the sharing process begins; following that participant, the talking stick is passed clockwise around the Circle until each participant has an opportunity to speak in response to the prompt at hand. This process is then followed for each subsequent prompt.

The Circle is governed by a rule that cross-talk is not permissible. If a participant wants to respond to something said by someone else, they must wait until they are in possession of the talking stick. Ellie enforces this rule as a way of maintaining focus and control.

As participants speak, a scribe will record (as verbatim as possible) the words of each participant in response to the prompt. This recording is done without attribution (e.g. there is no notation, "Bill said x.") Depending on the situation, the scribe may be a volunteer from the Circle participants or it may be Ellie herself or a combination thereof.

Once a Circle begins, there is no break until the Circle concludes (participants may individually use the restroom but then must return to the on-going Circle).

Every Circle must also include "someone of power" within the organization as a Circle participant; this is to ensure that each Circle participant feels that their words are being "heard."

Reasons to Use a Talking Circle: There are innumerable reasons why an organization would want to utilize a Talking Circle—for example, they can provide great foundational input for developing an organization's Inclusivity, Diversity & Equity (IDE) Plan. In other instances, Ellie has recommended using Circles to foster better organizational communication or to deal with an issue that impedes operational cohesiveness or inclusivity. On one occasion, Ellie facilitated a Circle to heal an organization suffering from "organizational post-traumatic stress" created by previous dysfunctional management.

Note: because Talking Circles uniquely provide team or organization members with an opportunity to speak, they inevitably increase expectations that the organization will, in fact, listen to what is said. This then raises expectations about organizational change. If the organization is not seriously interested in considering or implementing change, a Talking Circle could be counterproductive. Moreover, it makes no sense to engage in a Talking Circle as a form of "window dressing."

Technical Needs: A Talking Circle requires space to have an actual circle—chairs organized in a circle with no barriers (such as a table) between participants.

The number of participants can range from three to twenty persons. In rare instances, Ellie will conduct a Circle of up to twenty-five people. Optimal size is ten to fifteen people.

This is a very low-tech exercise that only requires notecards, pens or felt tip markers (preferably the latter) and a notepad for the scribe. Ellie supplies the talking stick.

Duration: 120 minutes at a minimum, up to 180 minutes for best results. It takes time to establish a certain cadence with a Talking Circle and often we do not “hit pay dirt” (e.g. honest sharing) until the 60-minute mark. Once we hit pay dirt, however, you will obtain information that likely wouldn't be produced through any other mechanism.

For additional information contact:

Ellen (Ellie) Krug

President and Founder

Human Inspiration Works, LLC

elliekrug@gmail.com

319-360-1692

www.elliekrug.com

www.humaninspirationworks.com

Book website: www.gettingtoellen.com

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