

What it is

A method for promoting deeper dialogue in group settings

What it can do

This tool can assist you to:

- Structure discourse in a way that encourages authentic speech and a deeper quality of listening.
- Have dialogues on challenging topics in ways that build community.
- Get maximum and equal participation from participants.

When to use it

- When asking people to weigh in on important decisions
- When discussing topics that are highly sensitive or emotionally charged
- When discussing topics that require an unusually high degree of thoughtfulness
- In situations where it is important to hear from everyone

How it works

This tool is available online at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

This format is widely used and called by different names including Wisdom Circles, Council, and Circle Sharing. The specific guidelines below have been adapted from the work of Rachel Kessler. A more detailed description of the sources for this process follows the instructions.

Step 1 Have everyone who is participating sit in a circle facing one another.

Step 2 Introduce/clarify the theme for the council meeting/discussion.

Step 3 Explain the process for discussing the theme as follows:

- Each person present will have the opportunity to speak, without interruption, about [the theme] for up to ___ minutes.

NOTE: It is usually important to have someone time the speakers. If so, select a timekeeper before you begin the first round.

- Speakers cannot speak a second time until everyone has had a turn to speak.
- Anyone may “pass” if they are not ready. The facilitator offers those who “passed” an opportunity to speak before others get their second chance.
- There will be a brief pause after each speaker is done.
- We will say “thank you” to each speaker after the pause and before the next person speaks.
- We will follow a sequential order, moving [clockwise or counterclockwise] around the circle.

The facilitator or someone familiar with the process should speak first to model.

Step 4 Allow a minute or more of silence for people to reflect on the theme before beginning the first round.

Step 5 Invite people to focus on listening to each speaker, rather than on preparing your own remarks while someone else is speaking. *“Trust that when it is your turn, you will find what you need to say.”*

Step 6 Complete the first round of sharing.

Step 7 At this point there are three options:

1. End.
2. Do another round on a different topic.
3. Introduce a “connections” round on the same topic in which people can:
 - use this opportunity to clarify or go deeper into what they raised earlier in light of what they have now heard from others.
 - acknowledge people who have said something that was meaningful to them.
 - let others know if they moved them or provoked their thinking, or if they have had a similar experience.
 - point out themes or experiences that had a particular resonance for them.

Step 8 Create (or invite the group to create) a closing activity, such as:

- A moment of silence
- Invite individual volunteers to make a statement that closes the council

Things to consider/Additional tips for facilitating

Council comes from an ancient form of communicating, decision-making and community-building that has its roots in many cultures around the world, ranging from indigenous traditions of Australia, Africa and the Americas to ancient Greece and Quaker meetings.

Wisdom Circles are highly structured forms of discourse that:

- Build community and allow participants to know each other and be known in ways that lead to a sense of belonging and meaning.
- Require and develop listening skills, particularly the art of open and non-reactive listening.
- Encourage speakers to learn to briefly articulate the essence of what is important to them.

Guidelines for the facilitator:

- Your role is to set the theme or question(s) to be addressed.
- Do not interrupt or respond to participants unless there is an urgent need to remind someone (gently) to be brief, to relate their remarks to the theme, or for listeners not to interrupt.
- Model caring and attentive listening, and help hold the group energy field.

Council may or may not include some ceremonial elements that can foster a deeper sense of meaning and quality of reverence and respect. A sense of ritual can help people act respectfully toward themselves and one another and to speak about what is important to them in this context. To work, ritual elements must be comfortable to participants, be culturally appropriate, and not contain religious content.

Examples include:

- Placing a cloth in the center of the circle to represent the “hearth” of the community.
- Inviting participants to light a candle (or include several candles, which can each be lit by a different participant).
 - inviting participants to make a “dedication” out loud or in silence as they light the candle
 - a dedication may invite a quality, such as honesty or friendship, into the council. Honor someone who is celebrating, or ailing, or someone who has died, or a prayer for the success of the meeting.
- Placing a flower at the center, or some other object of beauty to focus on.
- Using a talking stick, a rock, a pine cone, or some other object that has meaning for the group.

Be prepared for the possibility that participants will share something unrelated to the theme you set. This can happen in any safe sharing circle. It is not necessarily about ignoring or forgetting your instructions. Often when people feel they are in a

genuinely safe and caring circle, they may feel an urgent need to talk about something that is pressing.

An alternative to passing around the circle is “popcorn” style, where individuals just speak when they are ready. This style can lead to periods of silence between speakers as individuals go through the internal choice of when to speak. With popcorn, it is important for the facilitator to ensure that no one speaks twice before everyone has had a chance to speak.

There are numbers of alternative forms and nuances in facilitating Wisdom Circles. For an excellent resource, consult: Zimmerman, Jack and Coyle, Gigi, *The Way of Council*, Bramble Books, 2009.