

TOOL n°3 – Conversation circles

“Tips and Tricks”

Start with the Why!

At the beginning of every circle meeting, clarify the purpose of the conversation. Participants need to know what is in it for them. This increases predictability and focus. When people feel that the gathering can generate added value for them, their willingness and enthusiasm to participate will grow. Circles must meet both individual and collective needs.

Set the Right Tone

How you introduce the topic will largely determine the atmosphere of the conversation. Set a tone (calm, serene, enthusiastic, serious, lighthearted, etc.) that fits the subject and goal of the circle. For example, the tone when discussing a recurring issue in the neighborhood will be more serious than a circle that is intended to get to know each other better.

Ensure the Right Infrastructure

The better the structure of the circle, the better the conversation will be. Therefore, make sure you have a good and easy to reach location for your meeting. Ensure sufficient light, air, space, and comfortable chairs.

Make, Visualize and Monitor Agreements

Make agreements with the group (group norms) based on their needs. It may be a good idea to display them somewhere. This makes it easy to refer back to them in case they are being disrespected. If it is difficult to maintain the right atmosphere during the meeting, interrupt the conversation and revisit the agreements with the group. If this doesn't bring change (you never know), feel free to stop and resume at another time.

Be Aware of Your Own Attitude and Mood

Your attitude and feelings as a facilitator influence the atmosphere and flow of the circle conversation. Just as your enthusiasm and confidence will radiate, so will your suspicion and doubt affect the group. Believe in yourself and in the process. Embody the power of the circle.

Remain calm, even when someone expresses a negative reaction or accusation. Confront this behavior in a nonviolent and connecting way and try to reframe the accusation. Behind every accusation lies an unmet need. Look for this by listening carefully and checking if you understand each other.

And if things go too far, stay extra alert to your own feelings and act on them. Address the issue quickly. If you wait too long, you might respond too emotionally.

Seek Allies

It helps to look for allies within the group, especially when you want to discuss a tension that exists in the neighborhood. Allies are positive leaders who are not easily swept up in negative group pressure. Have a conversation with them beforehand, listen to their experience, and invite them to share it with the group. Let them know you'll begin the circle with them. Some may be nervous. It's important to support them well. Make sure the group is attentive, and afterward, express your appreciation for their courage to speak.

Inform Those Who Were Absent

It is good practice to inform all neighbors on what was discussed. This may generate interest for the next meeting.

Mix the Group

To steer the dynamics in the right direction, ensure that familiar cliques are not always sitting together for small group discussions. When friends sit together, they may not speak due to loyalty, position, or fear of reactions. A quick icebreaker or mixer can help break these patterns.