

Community Action Circles

The center is still and silent
in the heart of an eternal dance of circles.
Rabindranath Tagore

Acknowledgments

This framework has been developed to assist communities across Canada with their vital community development work. Building strong and healthy communities requires a brave heart, a generous spirit, a quick and skillful mind and a hope in a better tomorrow.

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Christine Leischner
Project Co-ordinator

Marlene Thio-Watts
Project Director

Sue Peterson
Project Facilitator

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Creating Community Action Circles Community Building and Social Action in Small Groups

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1. What is a Community Action Circle?

Circles have been a part of our society for as long as we have existed. They are a natural part of our patterns of human interaction. There is an undeniable power in the shape of a circle. Since earliest times circles have been a channel and focus of energy. The circle has been a fundamental part of world spirituality, of people's cultures and of current day healing and justice practices. Self-discovery, strength, wisdom, knowledge and companionship are found in circles. Circles offer a means of sharing personal experience, thoughts and insights in an equitable and respectful environment.

A Community Action Circle is an informal, collaborative way of developing strong networks that in turn develop strong communities and positive social action. We have developed our process based on many forms of circles; Tribal Learning Circles (Open Learning Agency, 1993), Aboriginal Healing Circles (Yinkadinee Netsi Jegh Be Yigh, 1999), Wisdom Circles (Hyperion, 1998), Sacred Circles (Carnes & Craig, 1998) and Study Circles in Sweden. Each of these is based on the most basic precepts of groups; consciousness raising groups, support groups, therapy groups, educational groups and many others.

Community development is a planned process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. The crucial outcome of community development is to improve the quality of life for the people in our society. Community action circles can do just this in the format of a small group. These circles can be an important tool in creating strong, sustainable community development. At their core, Community Action Circles are a tool for building a strong and active group that will exercise their inherent power with others to develop social action towards an explicit purpose.

Community Action Circles can transform not only individuals but also communities. By collaboratively developing a collective sense of identity, purpose and strategy, the circle will evolve a critical stance and awareness of the social issues being addressed. Once this awareness is created, the circle can move toward social action and community change.

2. What happens in Community Action Circles?

The group owns the process of the action circle. Though it is facilitated by an action circle facilitator, there are no teachers or "experts" in the circle. Every member is a teacher, their own expert and at the same time, a learner. There is no hierarchy, no top down direction or power-over in the group. It is the collective knowledge and experience of the group that brings the strength to the circle. In a way, it is a means of recreating the smaller communities we historically lived and worked in. By coming together in an equitable environment we expand the range of vision of each of the

groups members. The circle does not create passive participation. The circle encourages equality, respect and critical awareness.

The eventual outcome of the circle is to create social change, however the process of building the circle and involving the members is as important as the outcome.

There are three stages to an action circle. The first stage involves planning and bringing the circle together. The second stage focuses on presenting the learning material and generating discussion of the issue. The third stage of action circles includes collectively building the groups strategy for community-based social action.

3. Getting Started: How do we facilitate a Circle?

How to Organize and Facilitate Action Circles

In the Blackfoot tradition, the Sun Dance begins when a sacred woman makes a vow and "calls" the dance. She does not control the dance, she is not the authority on the dance nor does she do all the work of the dance. It is her beginning vow that has called the dance into being but it remains the task of the community to bring the dance into existence (Open Learning Institute, 1993).

Similarly, when the Community Action facilitator "calls" the circle, it becomes a reality that will depend on the willpower of each individual within the circle. The facilitator's focus allows the circle to draw its boundaries but the outcome of the circle will rest with the strength of the circle members.

In our communities there are many social issues that we may wish to change however we realize that the work of social change can not be done alone, we need "community " to provide the energy and direction for this change. Change can begin with one person posing a question or with a group of people feeling a need to do more. Either way, it will require a collective action that can best be gained through the actions of the circle.

Who calls the Circle?

Anyone can organize the circle and it does not need to be the same person who is going to facilitate it. The organizer however is responsible for the logistical arrangements, for ensuring that a facilitator is available and that the action circle is created and runs smoothly. The organizer determines the focus for the circle, who will be involved, the purpose of coming together and the overall goals. The success of the circle's progress will be determined by the organizer; how flexible and encouraging the agenda is and how carefully the tone has been set between too specific and too broad of goals.

The role of facilitator is much a more defined role. The facilitator will need to be able to balance the need for attainable goals and the groups need to explore possibilities. They

will be responsible for finding and choosing the learning materials or in some cases even developing their own materials to be used in the circle. Their other tasks will include the facilitation of the sessions, a method of evaluating the success of the sessions and for ensuring that the goals of the action circle are realized.

Tips for Facilitation

- **Be flexible.** Though it is important to plan your circle in advance it is also important to be adaptable and to meet the needs of the group.
- **Explain the process before you start.** People get there a lot faster when they know where they are going.
- **Allow time for meaningful discussion.** Some people like to hear themselves talk and others prefer to let them take the floor however every one has something of value to offer and demonstrating equality begins with ensuring everyone's voice is heard.
- **Know before hand how to respond to difficult situations.** Conflict is a normal part of group development however not everyone is comfortable with it. Acknowledge it when it comes up and take time to resolve it. Practice turning negative scenarios into positive learning experiences.
- **Your enthusiasm and interest in the issue will be apparent to the participants.** Their trust and commitment to the group will be developed based on your facilitation.
- **Do not dominate or control the group's discussion.** Your job is to keep things on track not to make decisions for them.
- **Use humor.** It is easier to see issues or acknowledge problems if it is done in a non-threatening manner.
- **Ask Questions.** By asking questions, participants are able to think through situations and problems better.
- **Always ask for feedback.** If we can learn from our experiences we become more effective facilitators.
- **The action circles are not therapy sessions and will need to be redirected if they stray this way.**

Remember the key skills to facilitation are listening, synthesizing discussion and moving the discussion and learning forward.

4. Where is all the Action?: The role of Participant

Who should be in the Circle?

The circle process can act to help bring together both grass roots and service providers to organize and plan for healthy development but both must be in the circle for this to

happen.

Because community development is a grassroots process it is important that we do not create only "Astroturf" (this is fake grassroots that look real but are most likely professionals in the system). Grassroots are the people that are directly affected by the issue and who have a vested interest in dealing with the problem. The involvement of grassroots is crucial to the process, as it is their personal development of a critical stance that will fuel the process of empowerment and ultimately social change. Previous social action was seen as exclusively the domain of the oppressed people, however, more and more social action proponents are seeing the benefits of the inclusion of the middle management. They hold some power to sway policy makers at the same time as being aware of the need to collaboratively work with marginalized groups to ensure effective and responsive services. So long as the grassroots are not intimidated by the "professionals" and the professionals can share power with all members of the group this makeup of service providers and marginalized grassroots members can have significant benefits.

Considerations for all member of the Circle

The grassroots or service users are also busy people, they need to receive a welcoming or personal invitation to participate and to be considered in the planning of times and places of the circle. It is the work of the facilitator to ensure that everyone in the circle feels they have the right to participate and that their wisdom and opinions are heard and valued. Everyone in the circle has something to contribute.

Group Discussion

If more than one learning circle is being facilitated, the initial session of the action circle will probably not contain as much discussion as subsequent circles. Time will be taken up in presenting the learning materials however it is important in this meeting to set the tone of the circle and begin to develop a relaxed and respectful atmosphere.

"Calling" the Circle

An ideal number for the circle is between 8 and 12.

You will need a comfortable room where there will be no interruptions and where members feel safe to share their ideas, comments and concerns. The circle should only contain as many seats as there are members of the circle. Always configure the circle as a circle. Do not use tables. This helps to promote a feeling of unity, equality, energy and connection that is key in developing the action circle process.

Refreshment breaks should happen at scheduled intervals but should be kept to a

minimum as extended breaks can compromise the integrity of the work.

The beginning time for any group is a crucial time. At the outset the tone is set and respectful boundaries are established. The circle should start with introductions and a list of safety features that will assist in establishing a comfortable and trusting environment. Each group should generate their own safety features but there are a few standard features that should be included each time. These include maintaining a respectful environment, confidentiality and everyone shares.

People will need to introduce themselves and become familiar with each other. Icebreakers can be used to help to set a collaborative tone. They open the way for discussion, set a course of action and facilitate movement towards a goal. Icebreakers "break" resistance, cutting through barriers to establish group connection.

The philosophy and concepts of a community action circle will need to be discussed with the group. The ideals of collaboration, shared expertise and participant control are not the usual tone for many of the meetings we engage in. The facilitator will need to emphasize the importance of commitment in creating a positive circle experience and positive outcome to the action circle process.

No matter how the group turns out, remember there are no absolutes. Success is not always measured by the obvious outcome. There is no "one way" of facilitating a group, just as there are no "right" solutions to every situation. Each facilitator will have their own styles just as each group will have its own dynamics and outcomes. The group will take more complete ownership of the group process if they feel respected, validated and worthwhile in the process of learning and action.

Remember ...

There are three key stages to an action circle. The first stage involves planning and bringing the circle together.

The Second stage focuses on presenting the learning material and discussion of participant's thoughts and feelings about the issue.

The Third stage requires the group to build strategies for social action that will attempt to impact policy or practice that relates to the social issue discussed.

Tips to remember for the first circle

- Consider the matters of time and place**
- Plan an effective icebreaker**
- Explain action circles and the planned goals, discuss with group**
- Establish the groups safety features**

- **Let people know that the process will be evaluated and how (evaluation form)**
- **Share the tasks of recording salient points from discussions**
- **This meeting will set the tone and people will decide to 'buy in' or not**

Steps to a successful community action circle

Step 1: Build a circle and they will come.

Step 2: Create a respectful and meaningful experience.

Step 3: Ensure that everyone is heard and involved.

Step 4: Encourage the group to 'own' the process and the outcome.

Step 5: Be respectful of people's time, end when you say you will.

Step 6: Develop a draft plan of action where everyone has input.

Step 7: Leave on a positive upbeat note, setting a future date for the next circle.

Keeping the Circle Strong

Leadership

*While consistent and strong leadership is essential for community development, there is a fine line between the "lead" role assumed by some community developers and the collaborative relationship needed in action circles. While the facilitator's job is to build the groups capacity for action they must also encourage empowerment and group control so that leadership will be developed from the group. **THE FACILITATOR SHOULD NOT BE THE ONLY GROUP LEADER!** A strong leader can be anyone in the group who thinks of the group as a community and works to build and maintain relationships within the group.*

The work of leaders in the group will be to maintain openness and accessibility. The group will come to know who the leaders are, their values and beliefs and the values and beliefs of their organization. This is what the group will use as a basis of establishing trust.

Lack of identified leaders can put the action process at risk and result in the facilitator becoming more directive and being seen as the 'expert'. This can be avoided by encouraging leaders be identified from within the circle. Action Circle leaders are members who:

- *Hold a clear vision for the group or community or to address the social issue.*
- *Have no particular set of personal interests or personal agendas.*
- *Practice good listening skills and encourage group connections.*
- *Appropriately give constructive feedback.*

- *Work to develop leadership capacity in others.*

Closing the Circle

People have very busy schedules and so we should respect that not everyone can devote as much time to a cause as they might like. Keep the groups within a time frame and stick to it, unless it is to finish early. Ensure that the circles end on a positive or hopeful note so participants feel satisfied and wish to return to the next session. Anticipate the end of the circle and forewarn the participants. Let them know before the ending of the group and perhaps check-out with a brief comment from each. This can be related to a key learning from the material or perhaps an item of discussion that affected them. Then use the last few minutes to summarize the circle, bringing the action of the circle back to the overall goals and speaking to the direction for the coming circles.

5. Where do we go from Here?: Strategies for Social Action

The main purpose of action circles is to develop a strong sense of community and develop a plan for community action. Through newly developed knowledge, reflection and insight, participants can be engaged in a process of planning for social change.

The goal of social action is to shift power relationships and resources to ensure a benefit to disempowered or marginalized groups. Strategies for social action are based on crystallizing and catalyzing groups around social issues (thus community action circles). These groups then develop the organizational framework to take action for positive change.

In developing a community action circle, the group is organizing for change. They will need to exert pressure on power structures, institutions and political bodies. They will need to have a well-developed plan of action, a means of measuring attainment of goals and a method for ensuring that the community maintains ownership of the process.

Strategies for Social Action

Taking Stock (not to be confused with cattle rustling).

There are many different ways of determining your community's current position on a given social issue. One method used in FAS community development project is a tool designed by the Pr. George FAS Network team to determine a communities readiness for change and their capacity to make the required changes (FAS Community Development Indicators of Readiness, 2000). Effective tools to determine community capacity will assist in developing the necessary strategies for deciding the first actions to take.

Deciding what needs to be done will be the first action task in this stage. Many participants will have ideas for the social action and brainstorming or mind mapping (see Section on

Mind mapping) these are a good start. Some things to remember are:

- *Keep the ideas concrete or specific*
- *Will these "solutions" be effective?*
- *Can these ideas be achieved within the time line of the action*
- *Are the ideas "doable"?*
- *Ensure that the actions are time limited.*
- *Ask the question "How will this change the problem?"*

Once a number of actions are agreed on it is important to identify who will do what by when and with whom. This step is important for several reasons. It shares responsibility and ownership of the solution as well as keeps the process organized and on track. You have also set the agenda for the next circles and laid the groundwork for the direction of the groups social change.

Guiding Principles of Community Action Work

In providing the community with a tool for action we must also assume responsibility for adhering to values and practice that are ethical and progressive. In all our work we must constantly measure our practice by a set of standards that are morally and socially acceptable. As a community, we have certain sets of values from which rise from our beliefs. These we accept as truths and we act to ensure they are followed. In doing community development work we must follow a given set of "truths" or core values. The following are currently acceptable values to consider that will guide our work and help us maintain an empowering critical stance (Labonte, 1999).

Guiding Principles of Community Development

Respect addresses the inherent worth, dignity and abilities of all members to ensure positive and productive relationships in the circle.

Equity is our ability to treat all individuals with fairness and ensure justice thus creating an equitable environment.

Participation by all members is the only way to ensure the outcomes truly reflect the needs and wants of the community. And the value of everyone's participation can not be understated. The meaningful inclusion of all community participants especially those with marginalized voice is required to bring accountability and honesty to our work.

Power sharing suggests that power imbalances exist with in all communities but we must work towards eliminating these or at the very least acknowledging their existence and working to minimize the inherent damage of power-over others. The hope is that this will empower the community and ensure sustainable programming.

***Meaningful process** is created when we acknowledge that the road to the goal is just as important as the final outcome. In order for a community to be empowered, all members must have been apart of the entire process, this could be one of the most important aspects of community development.*

***Integrity** is a value that community developers must hold to be accountable to the community they are working in.*

***Hope** is a gift we can bring communities. Through effective community development the shared action brings hope of change and progress to the concerns of a community.*

While many of our values are shaped by our own experiences circumstances, culture, education or social standing we must work to be aware of how these factors have influenced our interaction in community and to understand their influence on every one we work with.

Evaluation

Evaluation is the most often forgotten step in doing action circles. Evaluation provides us with an overall picture of how the circle was received by the participants and how it may or may not have been successful. Facilitators and organizers can learn from evaluations. They assist in knowing which areas require revision and what areas are successful in their objectives. Overall evaluations help us maintain the energy and directive of the social action.

The appendix includes a sample evaluation. This is a suggestion only. You may have other more creative ideas or there may be required evaluations you are asked to use. Whatever the case use one!

Ending

If you are still reading this document as we come to the end of our task, then you have chosen to engage in a powerful opportunity. Community Action Circles may appear simple and straightforward, almost common sense, however, they require someone with vision to see them into existence and follow them through to reality. You must be such a person!

If you chose to now engage in Community Action Circles you will be investing in a sustainable community development action which could have consequences far down the road. Don't expect quick results, community development is a long and often times misunderstood art and skill.

Learning and experiencing an empowering process like action circles can transform both the people who take part and the communities in which they live and work. By respecting and providing opportunity to participants, there is the chance for knowledge, growth, and growth to exist.

There is a certain magic in circles, a transformation that goes beyond the ordinary and

illuminates what is best in us - our compassion and caring for our world around us.

Good Luck from the Prince George FAS Network!

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151 - 10090 152nd St. Suite #187, Surrey, B.C. V3R 8X8 (TEL - 604-589-1854 or

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