

# CIRCLE GUIDELINES



## HEART

Speak with the heart

Listen with the heart



## RESPECT

Respect the talking piece

Speak with respect

Listen with respect



## HONOR

Honor privacy

Honor time

Honor the process





## Community Guidelines Explained

### 1. Heart

- a. **Speak and Listen with the Heart** - It is very important to speak truthfully and honestly. Listen with an open mind.

### 2. Respect

- a. **Respect the Talking Piece** - Wait for your turn and respect the person who has the talking piece. There should be no interruptions from anyone else in the group even if there is a disagreement or a rebuttal. Any person can choose to pass the talking piece without sharing.
- b. **Speak and Listen with Respect** - Everyone has the right to speak but they must do so without attacking or threatening anyone else in the group. Listen without interrupting or commenting. Refrain from thinking about your own response while others are speaking.

### 3. Honor

- a. **Honor Privacy** - To create trust among participants and help the circle process become more personal, it's crucial participants understand the responsibility of keeping anything shared confidential. A good way to frame it is, "what is said in the circle, remains in the circle." When working with young people, be sensitive and honest about your mandatory reporting responsibilities.
- b. **Say Just Enough** - The circle process allows all participants to share their truth. All participants are also responsible for being aware of time – a long sharing is not equivalent to depth. Be succinct.
- **Trust the process** - A circle process gives everyone a voice on equal footing; you do not have to fake emotion, or be a different person to see the benefits of a circle. Be honest, be authentic, be you.



## Circle Structure

### Overview:

Opening

Check-in

Introduce the Talking Piece

Guidelines

Values

Discussion Rounds

Check-out

Closing

1. **Opening** – Introduce yourself and the purpose of the circle. Use a positive tone; depending how you approach the circle, those participating will follow. Emphasize the circle is a safe space for everyone.

*Example of how to start a circle: a sound, quote, poem, song, breathing exercises, mindfulness practice, icebreaker*

2. **Check-in** – This allows the facilitator to gauge how participants are doing mentally, emotionally and physically. Never ask yes or no questions, for example “are you doing okay today?” Ask open-ended questions so participants assess themselves.

*Examples of check-in questions: “How are you feeling today?” “If you could describe how you feel using one word, what would it be?” “Describe how you are feeling today with as weather report.”*

3. **Introduce the Talking Piece** - The purpose of the talking piece is to ensure the circle honors and hears all participants’ voices. Utilize an object as the talking piece with a personal connection to you as facilitator or to the group.

*Examples of talking pieces: picture, book or any other small object (make sure it’s not breakable)*





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- 4. Guidelines-** All participants need to be aware they have responsibilities as participants. Keep the guidelines visible to all participants during the circle and revisit them if they are violated. The most common guidelines are: Speak and Listen with Respect; Speak and Listen from the Heart; Respect the Talking Piece; Honor Privacy; Say Just Enough; Be Authentic

*Note: These are a good baseline, you could allow the circle to come up with guidelines. It is also helpful to do a quick round reflecting on the guidelines to build ownership*

- 5. Values** – Identifying shared values allows participants to create a safe space for themselves and invest in the community of the circle. Depending on the purpose of the circle, these values can be established once and revisited each meeting or established with a specific question for a one-time meeting.

*Examples of establishing values: sharing aloud and creating a list, each person write on an index card, etc.*

- 6. Discussion Rounds** - This step is the lengthiest and most meaningful part of circle process because it is the substance of sharing. Crafting quality, open-ended questions is essential to a good discussion. Being aware of how comfortable participants are with sharing and gradually moving participants to deeper sharing is an important role of the facilitator. Always consider the audience and purpose of the circle when preparing this step.

- 7. Check Out** – Allow participants to reflect on the process of the circle itself and on the discussion.

*Examples of check-out questions: "how has sitting in circle today felt?" "Share one word for how you feel about the discussion today."*

- 8. Closing** – Give a clear ending to the process. Thank everyone for sharing.

*Examples of closing: quote, a poem or a reflective piece to supplement and strengthen the closing process.*







## Circle Prep Worksheet

**1. Opening** – What is the purpose of the circle? How will you open the circle? You can use a writing, sound, centering activity, icebreaker activity, game etc....

**2. Check-in** - What will be your check-in question? Low-risk, quick

**3. Introduce the Talking Piece** – Describe your talking piece and its significance. Describe your centerpiece and its significance.

**4. Guidelines/Values** – How will you introduce core guidelines? What questions will you ask and/or interactive exercise will you use to create shared values?



**5. Discussion Rounds** – What questions will you ask and in what order? How many rounds?

**6. Check Out** – How are people feeling now? What will be your final question?

**7. Closing** - How will you close the circle? You can use a quote, poem, activity, sound, etc...?



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## Circle Keepers

A circle keeper can make or break the process. A great circle keeper does the following:

- ❖ **Recognize the circle keeper is an equal participant in the circle with all other participants. Do not play the role of teacher/facilitator**  
The work of the circle keeper is before the circle in preparation. During the circle, you share along with all other participants.
- ❖ **Stay present and listen with care and compassion**  
Always make sure you are paying attention and actively listening. Model active listening, and participants will feel like others care about what they say. This creates connection in the circle.
- ❖ **Speak honestly & deeply**  
Circle keepers are also members of the circle, not just facilitators. When you share personal experiences, it helps others build trust in you, the process, and the space. By showing vulnerability, you let others know they can do the same without fearing judgment.
- ❖ **Speak warmly & slowly**  
You set the tone. If you begin the circle with a positive and upbeat tone, it is very likely the participants will do the same. Make sure people can hear and understand you.
- ❖ **Cultivate inner silence and speak briefly**  
While you model vulnerability, you must also become aware of not speaking too much or making yourself the center of attention. Make sure you are concise when guiding the conversation.
- ❖ **Observe nonverbal cues**  
Be aware of participants' body language. Are your participants sitting up and actively listening or are they slouching and looking tired? Observe cues and offer breaks. Do folks seem upset by a question? Observe cues, and ask follow up questions. (Over)



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## ❖ Craft thoughtful questions

Preparing your circle questions in advance is crucial to the process. Formulating questions to elicit honest responses and to best fit the purpose of your circle can make or break your circle. Always use your best judgment on when it is appropriate to change the question, reframe the question, or dig a little deeper with other questions.

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## Crafting Quality Questions

In community building circles, well-crafted questions, both **build** the trust and connection in the group, as well as **guide** the group towards deeper trust, vulnerability and intimacy. It is **ESSENTIAL** to thoughtfully prepare questions ahead of time.

### High Quality Questions Are...

<b>Relevant</b>	Of interest to the whole group Questions people can answer and will answer Developmentally appropriate
<b>Give Voice to Existing Unspoken Questions</b>	Enable each participant to share experiences Effective circles often make <i>implicit</i> social interactions, <i>explicit</i> within the circle <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Example: (for young people) "What works for making friends?" "What works in resolving conflict between friends?"</li></ul>
<b>Simple and clear language</b>	Easy to understand; Edited for clarity
<b>Open-ended</b>	Make sure it is NOT a yes/no question and story-telling is possible
<b>Inquiry not advocacy</b>	The goal is to find out more NOT elicit a specific response <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Example: "What makes relationships work well?" (inquiry) Vs. "Why is it best to be polite?" (advocacy)</li></ul> AVOID: Leading questions which require participants to only look at a few responses to an experience



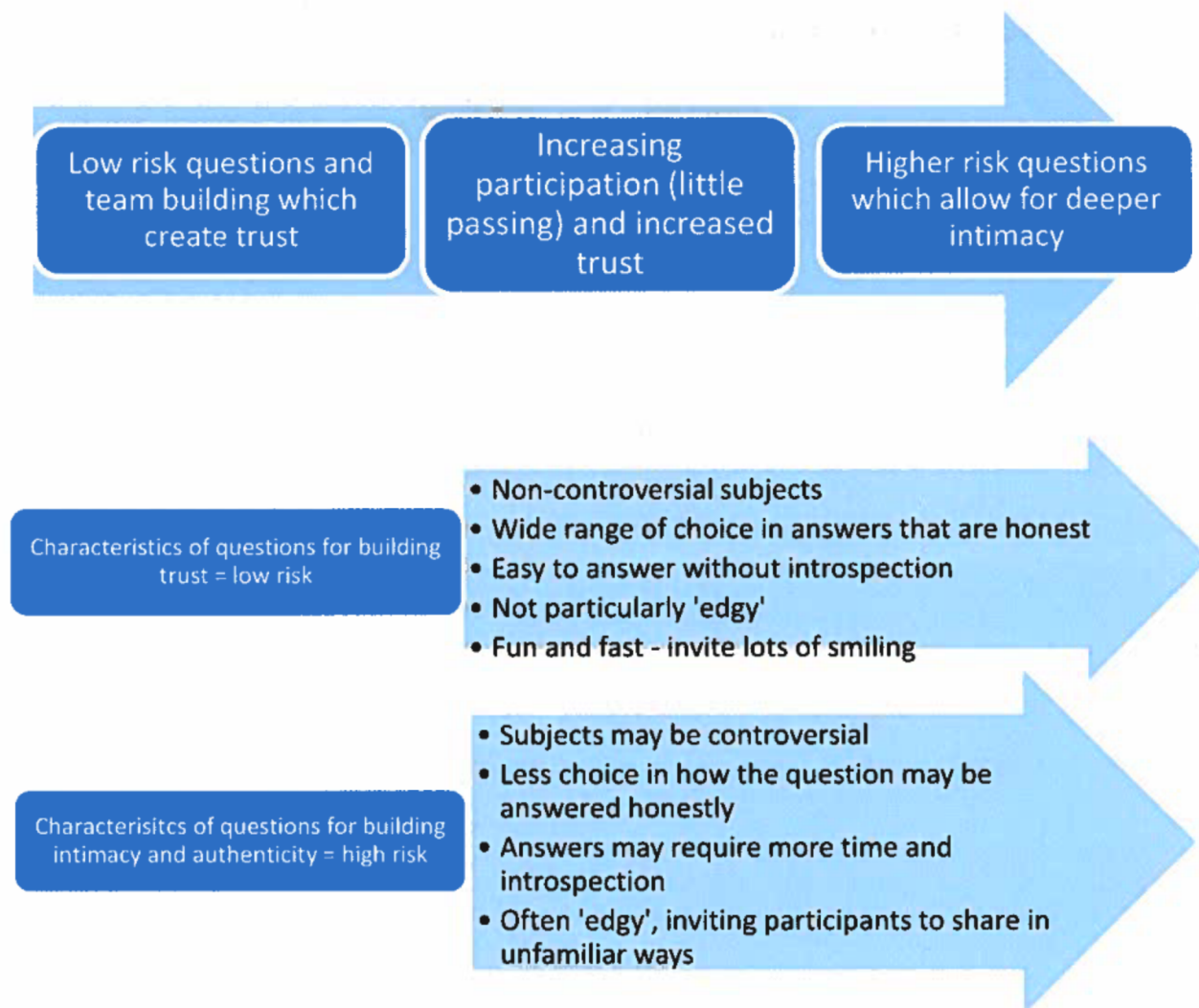
<b>Inquiry not advocacy cont'd</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>Example: "Talk about a time you were stressed (inquiry)" vs. "Talk about a time you were stressed and handled it well" (advocacy)</i></li></ul> <p>AVOID: Veiled statements which turn a statement into a question</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>Example: "Why are boys so crazy?" (You are making a statement Boys are crazy. Why?)</i></li></ul> <p>AVOID: Asking for opinions – "opinion is generally story robbed of its narrative" – Joseph Provisor. Try to move beneath opinion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>Example: "Tell about a time when..." (inquiry) vs. "What do you think about..." (advocacy)</i></li></ul>
<b>Relate to current events</b>	Circles are ideal to process local, national, and international events/news to which people have strong reactions
<b>Are Re-Storying</b>	<p>Open us to changing the 'stories' we have about each other</p> <p>Enable people to share their stories and access underlying experiences for opinions and/or emotions</p> <p>Should not <i>require</i> sharing feelings because feelings often come out when we share stories.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>Example: "How did you feel when..." is less effective then "Talk about a time when..."</i></li></ul>





## Sequencing Your Questions

In a trusting environment, participants can safely risk self-disclosure, authenticity, confrontation and expressing affection. **People will not share with depth if they do not feel emotionally safe with those in the circle.** Circle keepers cannot force depth; instead, trust the maturation of the circle to positively influence participant sharing:





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**One exercise to craft questions** – Reflect on meaningful experiences in the community, currently or in the past, and ask a question from that experience. Consider the inherent topics in that question. Use those topics to craft prompts for circle.

Example: *Experience:* a friend in trouble. *Question:* "If I know a friend is in trouble and needs help and has asked me not to tell anyone, what should I do?" *Inherent topics in this issue/question:* confidentiality, secrets, friendships, promises, the 'greater good'. *Craft a question that elicits story-telling.* For example, on secrets, "talk about a time you felt you had to keep a secret, or about a time you knew you could not keep a secret."

## Brainstorming Your Questions:

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## Proactive Circles – 80%

Building Classroom Culture	Curriculum Use
Get to know each other  Establish Social Contract	Summarize Lessons <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What did you learn?</li></ul>
Check in and check out (daily; weekly)	Solicit Student Feedback and Process Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What was interesting? What stayed with you? What was helpful? Unhelpful?</li><li>• Pair/share and report back</li></ul>
Establish trust and intimacy  Storytelling <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sharing experiences</li><li>• Discussing implicit social interactions</li></ul>	Discuss topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elicit reactions to difficult topics i.e. slave trade in history class</li><li>• Discuss current events and how they relate to class</li></ul>
Transitions <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Transferring students</li><li>• Transitioning teachers – maternity/paternity leave</li><li>• Returning students from a long illness etc.</li></ul>	Introduce new unit <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What would you like to know?</li></ul>
Affirmations and peer feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Something another student did that helped me today/this week is...</li></ul>	Review <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Raise questions: What are you worried about?</li><li>• Game – toss ball and ask questions</li></ul>



## Responsive Circles – 20%

Address behavior patterns in class:

- Think about what is happening in class that isn't working. How am I contributing?
- What kind of atmosphere do you ideally want in class?
- Reflect and think about what each person is going to do to attain the ideal. What's my responsibility?

Revisit social contract

- Revisit expectations and responsibilities if behaviors have moved away from social contract agreements
- Modify agreements in circle process

Frame a circle to problem solve, not catch a culprit

- Ex: if theft is an issue in class: Name what has gone missing and how you feel. What do you think can be done to address the issue?

Deal with classroom climate issues

- Ex: Racial jokes. Ask broad circle questions: Tell about a time you were misunderstood. Tell about a time you teased another person. What prevents you from learning in class?

Deal with many off-task students

- What is happening that makes it difficult to focus? What should we do about this?

After an incident in school, community and/or nation

- What happened? How does it impact you? What do you need?





## Options for Discussion Rounds

*Judicious use of circles provides more time for teaching and learning, not less*

- **Popcorn** – non-sequential – raise hand; invite folks to take talking piece when ready
- **Fishbowl** – large outside circle, smaller inner circle; those on outside are silent witnesses – asked for comment and observation on circle process
- **Spiral** – like a fishbowl with an empty chair in the center – persons in outer circle can sit in empty chair if they have a contribution
- **Feedback** – the person speaking is given a limited time to share, and the person to speak next is given the responsibility to time them
- **Wheelhouse** – inside and outside circle face each other to create pairs; instruct outer circle to leave chairs and move to the left to create new pairs
- **Small group**– Multiple circles happening at the same time; works best with participants who have considerable experience in circle





## Question Bank – Some suggestions

### Check-in

- One word that describes how you are feeling at that moment; one color; one weather
- Talk about something fun you did during the weekend.
- Name your favorite animal, music, singer, movie, actor/actress, food etc.
- If you could have any super power what would it be and why?
- If you were an animal, what type of animal would you be and why?
- Talk about something that made you smile this morning.
- We recognize that everyone took time out of their schedules to be in this circle. What else is on your mind right now?

### Discussion Rounds

- Share a happy childhood memory
- How would your best friend describe you?
- If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
- Talk about some traditions your family had when you were growing up.
- Who is someone you look up to and why?
- Tell us about a time when you were afraid. How did you deal with your fear?
- Talk about a time you were out of your comfort zone? What did you do and what were the results?
- Share what is working well in your community.
- Share what is not working well or needs improvement in your community.

### Check-out Questions

- What is something you learned in this circle?
- What part of this circle did you like the best and why?
- Talk about something someone else said that stayed with you and why.
- One word to describe this circle experience.



## Quotes Bank – Some suggestions

### Motivational

"It always seems impossible until it's done" – Nelson Mandela



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"Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn." – Harriet Beecher Stowe

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched- they must be felt with the heart." – Hellen Keller

"I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to reach my destination." – Jimmy Dean

## ***Social Justice***

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." – Martin Luther King Jr.

"Be the change you want to see in the world." –Mahatma Gandhi

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." –Maya Angelou

"Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life, but define yourself." –Tim Fields

"You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it's right." – Rosa Parks

"I speak not for myself but for those without a voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated." –Malala Yousafzai

"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." -Lilla Watson

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