

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

---

Center for Engagement and Community  
Development

Engagement Symposium

---

## Two Modes of Conversational Circles

Terrie R. McCants  
*Kansas State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/cecd>



Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

McCants, Terrie R. (2017). "Two Modes of Conversational Circles," *Center for Engagement and Community Development*. <https://newprairiepress.org/cecd/engagement/2017/3>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Center for Engagement and Community Development by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## Two Modes of Conversational Circles

Terrie R. McCants

### Talking Circle: A Dialogue for Listening

This form of dialogue is inspired by Native American councils. It is practiced with many names and variations – Talking Stick Circle, Listening Circle, Wisdom Circle, Council Process, and others. All are marked by a special quality of listening – a reflective listening to let the speakers know they have been heard and understood accurately. The primary focus is on deepening, exploring, and learning together. It is best used for small groups.

#### *Instructions:*

1. A topic statement is agreed upon for discussion - one that is relevant and important to the participants, and usually one that invites at least two different perspectives.
2. All participants are seated in a circle, which helps everyone to fully see each other as peers sharing meaning, creativity, and a common center.
3. A stone (or other holdable object such as a stick) is given to one of the participants to begin speaking about the decided upon topic. That person will either agree or disagree with the topic statement, and then provide his rationale - his thinking and feelings about the topic statement.
4. No one speaks unless they have the speaking stone. No cross-talk or side conversations are allowed.
5. When the speaker is done, he passes the speaking stone to the person on his left who must reflectively listen back to the speaker what he said - capturing the facts, the feelings, and the overall meaning of the speaker's comments.
6. If the speaker agrees that what the listener described is accurate and complete, the listener now becomes the speaker; if the speaker does not agree that what the listener described is accurate or complete, they must take back the speaking stone and expand on what was misunderstood, and the listener will get another try to demonstrate their understanding before being given the speaking stone (this may repeat as many times as necessary until full understanding is demonstrated).
7. The new person holding the speaking stone must first state whether they agree or disagree with the previous speaker's stance. He will then provide his rationale (thinking and feelings about the topic statement).
8. Steps 5 through 7 will repeat allowing the speaking stone to continue around the circle giving everyone an opportunity to contribute.

9. The speaking stone can continue going around the circle for a specified amount of time, or until the conversation ends having passed at least one full round.

### The Samoan Circle: A Self-Governing Dialogue

The Samoan Circle meeting process is designed to facilitate the discussion of controversial issues when there is a large group of people interested in the topic.

- Its principal value is in the opportunity it affords for an exploration and exchange of knowledge and opinion where the large size of the group, or an environment of controversy, might disable other kinds of meetings.
- This meeting process is also useful when the possibility exists that no one person could be accepted as a fair moderator by all who might seek to be involved in the discussion.
- It is intended for the fullest possible exchange of information about an issue in anticipation of other group processes better designed for decision-making or conflict management.
- Although some users of the Samoan Circle have experienced spontaneous resolution of conflict views, it is a process that is not intended to resolve conflict.

#### *Instructions:*

1. There is no facilitator, chair, or moderator.
2. Participants are expected to maintain their own discipline.
3. Participants gather in two concentric circles - an inner circle with or without a table and four chairs; and an outer circle (with chairs for participants) with ample walking and aisle space.
4. Everyone begins in the outer circle.
5. The issue is presented, and discussion begins.
  - a. Those most interested take chairs in the inner circle; those less interested stay in the outer circle.
  - b. All can move in or out of the center as the discussion flows or topics change.
  - c. Each speaker makes a comment or asks a question.
  - d. Speakers are not restricted in what they say or how they say it, but they must sit in the inner circle to do so.
  - e. Once seated in the inner circle, parties may interrupt, or wait for an opening in any discussion that is going on; parties may stay as long as they feel they have a contribution to make to the discussion.

- f. The person taking a seat can join in the discussion OR try to change its direction, OR raise a new topic.
- g. Parties may leave and return again to the inner circle as often as they wish.
- h. If there are no vacant seats in the inner circle and someone is wishing to speak, they must stand behind a chair; this signals those already in the circle to relinquish their chairs.
- i. If someone wishes to talk to one of the people occupying the four discussion chairs, they are to stand directly behind that person's chair as a signal to the others in the circle to vacate one of their seats.
- j. No outside conversations are allowed; if participants wish to cheer, or groan, or make any other noises to represent their opinion, they must come to the inner circle to do so.
- k. Comments are often recorded. Votes of opinions held by non-speakers are taken at the end, if desired.
- l. To close a meeting, empty seats are taken away one by one until there are no more chairs, or discussions can be allowed to run its course if there is no time required for adjournment.

*Sample Questions:*

“Collaborative decision-making takes time, energy, and money. So, why would we make the effort, and what are the challenges we encounter?”

“Given recent demonstrations across our nation, how can this community best deal with racial tensions and law enforcement?”

“‘Conceal and Carry’ in Kansas begins July 1, 2017. How can we best keep our campuses safe for all (students, visitors, staff and faculty), and should there be any exceptions to this law?”

“Construction of the Dakota Pipeline provides a more cost-effective, efficient means of transporting crude while increasing profit margins for big oil companies. However, Native Americans have accused the government of approving pipeline construction without consulting them, a requirement under U.S. law. Environmental activists say the pipeline would perpetuate fossil fuel production. What is the best way forward?”

Overview, Objectives, Outcomes, etc. from the Resource Page of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation: <http://ncdd.org/rc/item/1439>

YouTube video of Samoan Circle being used to talk about the Brixton Riots:  
[https://youtu.be/o\\_jLdZZ98Fc](https://youtu.be/o_jLdZZ98Fc)