

# 6

CHAPTER

## *Circle, Step by Step*

*The overall flow* of a circle meeting is directed by the components of start-point, check-in, and check-out. These three components set a social container for a clear beginning, a path of conversation, and a clear ending. They are easy to use and explain and can stand alone or serve as a transition to the full use of circle process.

Christina was shopping in our local town when a business card fell out of her wallet and onto the counter. The shop owner scooped it up, “PeerSpirit . . . interesting name. I’m Linda, president of the chamber of commerce. What exactly do you do?” After a brief conversation, the woman invited us to join the chamber and suggested that we attend a board meeting, to be held a few days later at a Chinese restaurant. That was a Thursday afternoon.

On Saturday afternoon, we showed up at a round table in a small meeting room at the back of the restaurant to join the shop owner and five board members. We were introduced as potential chamber members, attending as observers. The meeting began. It was August, and five tiny bouquets of flowers decorated the middle of the table—nice touch, we thought. “Thanks for coming out on a summer Saturday,” Linda said, raising a tall glass of iced tea. “I propose a toast—for the good of the community and our commerce within it.” Everyone clinked glasses. The agenda items were laid out for all to see.

“For the benefit of our guests,” said Linda, “could we go around and each say something about how the chamber contributes to our business—one benefit of belonging? That would give PeerSpirit a sense of what we do.” This check-in set a thoughtful tone that lasted through several agenda items. About twenty minutes

into the meeting, a topic arose that veered into a rather delicate conversation about the financial tribulations of one particular business.

Linda leaned in and said, “If we’re going to discuss this, can we agree to confidentiality?” She looked at everyone around the table—we all nodded.

The next agenda item led to a rather gossipy string of comments about one of the town characters. As the board members revved up, Linda leaned in again. “Could we speak about him with curiosity instead of judgment?” Again she looked at us individually until we all nodded.

We were amazed watching Linda skillfully introduce circle in bits and pieces. She never mentioned the word *circle*. She didn’t use a bell or a talking piece. Yet she had chosen a round table and created a center in a completely unobtrusive way. She had introduced start-point by raising a toast to the intention of the chamber. She had used our presence as a rationale for check-in. And she had brought in agreements in the moment on an as-needed basis. None of the participants seemed to notice that the structure of the meeting was different—they were all engaged in content and let Linda tend to their process—yet it gave her a precedent. She could say at the end of the meeting, “Remember now, we agreed to confidentiality;” and at a future meeting she can say, “Remember that time we did a review of chamber benefits? Today, what if we do a review of...”

Of course, we signed on as members. We later had a background conversation with Linda, who explained that she had gone to the library Thursday evening and borrowed a copy of *Calling the Circle*. “I thought I should look at it before you showed up—and I decided to try out parts and see how it worked. Pretty well, don’t you think?” She looked quite pleased with her experiment. Linda’s hosting was one of the smoothest introductions of “a little bit of circle” we’ve ever seen—and we’ve told the story many times since.

When PeerSpirit trains people in the use of circle, we often say, “If you don’t try anything else, try these three elements: start-point, check-in, and check-out. It’s easy, it’s helpful, and it works in virtually any setting.” These are the components that open, initiate, and close the container of circle; they weave the group without having to teach the group.

### ***Start-Point***

A start-point begins a circle in an intentional manner. In many meetings, the transition between walking into the room and beginning the meeting is practically indistinguishable. The leader just starts talking over the buzz of the group, announcing the first agenda item. One of the hallmarks of circle process is that it

has boundaries—beginning, middle, and end. Start-point is an essential element that calls in the contained space for practicing attentive listening and intentional speaking that needs to occur, even if the full components are not named.

Start-points can be as simple as reading an inspirational quote, poem, or a meaningful paragraph from a book. Or they can be as elaborate as inviting people into a ceremony, such as filing into a hall. A start-point fits easily into the informality of the chamber board meeting. The culture of the Wheaton Franciscan sisters invited song and procession—not a common practice in organizational settings. Whatever is offered for a start-point, it serves to assist participants in shifting from social chatting into focused listening and speaking.

Start-points are part of common culture in public meetings and events. In the United States, we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, sing the national anthem at baseball games, and pray at presidential inaugurations and congressional sessions. Everyday rituals are widely accepted and expected and occur in every culture. We understand them as signals that shift our attention.

Offering the start-point is an incremental way to share leadership: Who will bring an opening thought for our next gathering? People often have favorite quotes, readings, or poems they are eager to share. The content of the start-point may lead directly into a check-in question.

In our neighborhood association, the year Ann was president, she called in the annual meeting by announcing, “What organizes us into a community is our shared water system and neighborhood maintenance, so I’d like to start by reading a poem about water—and I’m going to put this vase filled with our shared water and Louise’s beautiful flowers in the center of our table.” People stopped chatting and listened to the poem, and then she introduced check-in by saying, “I’m not sure everyone knows everyone else here, so let’s go around the room, say your name, how long you’ve lived in the neighborhood, and one thing you like about living here.”

People spoke briefly, “I’m Bill, I’ve lived here thirteen years, and I like that people are friendly.” Nothing apparently profound came forward, yet the weaving was strong enough that the tenor and efficiency of the meeting was noticeably smoother than in previous years. People left the meeting saying, “My, that went well,” without necessarily attributing the quality of their interactions to the weave at the beginning.

### ***Check-In***

The choice of question or story for a check-in sets the tone of the gathering. The host’s contribution to the success of check-in is to offer a question that ties in

to the purpose of the meeting. Questions about the benefits of the chamber of commerce or the length of time lived in a neighborhood set a tone that slows people down enough to realize that the meeting is beginning. The nature of the questions also set expectations that people will be moving fairly quickly into the major conversation or agenda items. A heartfelt question, such as “What do you love most about being part of this organization (family/community effort/etc.)?” invites a deeper, slower weave and sets the expectation that the check-in is a significant contributor to what’s to come. And whenever a question elicits a response revealing personal vulnerability, the check-in takes on a more profound quality—as is evidenced in many of the stories throughout this book.

It is helpful for the host and guardian to have a conversation about the length of time they expect check-in to take and the role they expect it to have in this particular meeting. They can hold this intention with each other and also hold the possibility that some surprising comment may enrich the group and shift expectations in ways they cannot anticipate as they go into the meeting.

Crafting questions is an art form. The choice of an opening question for check-in is a significant piece of preparation for whoever is calling the circle—the first time and every time. The question is like a flower that beckons to the bee, and the responses pollinate the ensuing conversation. The question can be designed to strengthen a sense of commonality or to shake loose attitudes and assumptions that may be preventing the group from considering options and seeing creative possibilities. Sometimes when we’ve been invited into a situation where tension and conflict are present, we’ll surprise people by starting with a check-in question that invites them to perceive the difficulty in a new way, such as the following:

- What about this current situation can you imagine being grateful for in the future?
- How is this situation maturing your leadership capacities?
- What is one shift in attitude or action you could take that could potentially improve the situation?

Our Danish colleague Toke Paludan Møller says, “If I can only have two tools going into a room, I choose a good question and a talking piece.” Intriguing questions serve to unlock a treasure chest of information, experience, and passion. Check-in questions can also invite stories that bring insight to the task at hand: “How did you come to be on this committee?” “Whom do you consider yourself

**EXHIBIT 6.1**

<b>Attributes of a Powerful Question</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Generates curiosity in the listener</li> <li>○ Stimulates reflective conversation</li> <li>○ Is thought-provoking</li> <li>○ Surfaces underlying assumptions</li> <li>○ Invites creativity and new possibilities</li> <li>○ Generates energy and forward movement</li> <li>○ Channels attention and focuses inquiry</li> <li>○ Stays with participants</li> <li>○ Touches a deep meaning</li> <li>○ Evokes more questions</li> </ul>
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representing?" "How do you see this piece of work contributing to your overall life path?" The possibilities for developing intriguing questions are endlessly varied and will shift groups in many directions. The delightful study of what constitutes a powerful question has been shared by many of us who are introducing collaborative conversation (see Exhibit 6.1).

Often when going to work with a new group, our longest search is for the right question—the one that will twirl the tumblers in the padlock where the group is stuck or will open perception to new and intriguing possibilities. Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs, founders of the World Café process, have posted a downloadable booklet, *The Art of Powerful Questions*, that is a classic reference guide and a gift to the rest of us. In it they write, "A powerful question also has the capacity to 'travel well'—to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or community. Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change."

In 2005, when working with Toke Møller and his dynamic community of hosts in Denmark, we asked him to send us home with a question that he would like to know we would be asking other Americans. He thought for a moment and suggested, "Ask, 'What else could America be?'" Versions of this question have traveled far and led us into stunning conversations across the fire of the center. "What else could this community be? This company? This school? This relationship?"

Check-in is a piece of circle practice that can work in almost every setting. Sometimes check-in is designed to lead to the main conversation; sometimes it is designed to serve as the main conversation. Working to help strengthen team spirit among nurse leaders at Craig Hospital in Denver, we brought one of our well-traveled questions to a breakfast cookout at Rocky Mountain National Park during a two-day training session and retreat. Craig Hospital is exclusively devoted to rehabilitation and research for patients with spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury and has treated more spinal cord injury patients than any other facility in the world. So here in the great nest of mountains, with elk wandering by the edge of the campground and squirrels chattering in the pine trees, we formed a circle under blue skies and asked the question “What led you to become a trauma care nurse?” This time we expected the check-in to be the essence of circle experience and had allotted ample time for the group’s responses and stories.

Terry Chase, once a patient at Craig and now its patient and family education coordinator, said of that event, “The authenticity of our stories and the quality of our listening that morning laid a foundation between us that I still remember when we’re dealing with each other in the day-to-day of the hospital. That’s when circle work was born in our organization.”

Sometimes check-in can reinvigorate intention and commitment when a group has meandered away from its original purpose. A women’s circle that had started out as a book discussion group focused on sharing thoughts, critiques, and insights gradually shifted to long check-in stories focused on the personal details of the women’s lives. A few members began to drift off; several more became ambivalent about wanting to stay. When it was our friend’s turn to host, she sent everyone a suggested check-in of three questions: “Why did I initially join this group?” “What has it given me?” “What do I want it to give me now?” The check-in rounds gave each member a voice and helped the women remember their intentions and explore their evolution. A few members felt complete with the experience and left with the good wishes of all present. The following month, a slightly smaller configuration returned to their focus on a common book with an opening round of check-in on their personal lives that was time-limited.

Sometimes a group can become so acclimated to check-in that the process turns into a perfunctory exercise. Check-in can lose its power to call people to presence. People may say something short and unrevealing, like “I’m here” or

“I’m fine.” Meaning comes from the intention people bring to bear when they participate. If check-in questions are routine or irrelevant, perhaps it’s time to shake things up. Elicit check-in questions via e-mail before a meeting to see what people would like to respond to. Invite each person to bring an object from home or the office that represents a special personal strength or skill and place it in the center with a story. Draw a card from a deck of words or images and respond. Be ready to be surprised.

### ***Check-Out***

Start-point and check-in create a clear beginning and set a meeting on a path of interaction. Just as it is important to open circle space with an invitation to participation, so it is important to consciously close the space. Check-out can be as variable as check-in: closing with quotes, readings, or poems; removing check-in items from the center of the circle with a brief thought, sharing a round of appreciation, or simply ringing a bell for a closing pause. A commonly used closure is to ask people to “share one thing you learned from our meeting today.” If the meeting has been scribed, use the opportunity to harvest insights and to thank those who have stepped in to take on tasks or leadership roles. As soon as the check-out is complete, the group will erupt into social time, and everyone will notice the shift in energy.

Sometimes check-out can be the major conversation in a longer group process. Near the end of the school year, after a number of different collaborative meetings and conversations with elementary school teachers, we wanted to complete our engagement with them with an experience that might heal some of the tensions that had accumulated over the year and acknowledge that layoffs were occurring: this was the last time this particular group of teachers would all be together. We had introduced them to circle and to World Café. We had told the story of the California middle school—and they had adopted and posted those agreements around the school: “Take care of yourself, take care of each other, and take care of this place.” They had developed their own staff agreements. We had hosted conversations on resilience in the midst of unrelenting change. The reduction in force announcements had gone out. Negotiations were still under way, and some people were uncertain of their employment status. We had three hours on the Friday before Memorial Day. We started with lunch.

Tables had been moved out of the community room, and we had set a center—a cardboard box covered with a tablecloth—in the middle with a big

bouquet of local flowers donated by a parent and dozens of photos of the teachers' students played out in a colorful spiral. We conducted a brief review of the year, offered a few journal-writing exercises to ground them into their strengths as teachers, and offered the invitation—this time for checking out: “Choose one story of success you’ve had with a child this year.” Every teacher spoke. Every teacher had a story of great heart. They all slipped into their deepest knowing of themselves as teachers. Things would be different, difficult; maybe they wouldn’t be back. But what they remembered and witnessed for one another on that day was that they had made a difference in the lives of children. The check-out took ninety minutes. There was no fidgeting—not one of them wanted to miss a single story. For those ninety minutes, they celebrated themselves as the community of caring teachers they had been in a challenging year.

Pamela Austin Thompson, CEO of the American Organization of Nursing Executives (AONE) and coauthor of PeerSpirit’s booklet on circle and nursing leadership, has one instruction for people interested in trying circle in organizational settings: “Practice—just start somewhere and practice,” she says. “Shifting a meeting into a more circular way of being still makes my knees shake, but you just have to jump in and try it and know that sometimes it will work better than others and that everything is a group learning experience.”

In an organization devoted to fostering a culture of communication from the administrative level to the direct care nurses, Pam uses some of the Components of Circle in many of the meetings she facilitates for AONE. “One of the skill sets I bring to the nursing community is how to convene people in a different way. Even if we don’t formally call it a circle, I always use check-in and check-out. I tell people, ‘Check-in convenes us and check-out releases us.’ Some people push back on the formal methodology of circle because it feels foreign to them. So often I simply introduce a component or two in the moment it’s needed and then afterward tell them, ‘That’s what circle is all about.’”

### ***Adopting Circle as an Organizational Methodology***

It’s a business adage that “to get a better outcome, hold a better meeting.” A fine thought but not very instructional in the “how-to” department. Many organizational leaders want *something* to be different: the effectiveness of meetings, the strength of relationships in teams or units, the ability to envision together, the commitment to mentor leadership development. Various components of PeerSpirit Circle Process have been successfully used as an



innovative group process shift to support these desires for different outcomes and greater success.

When Jerry Nagel, cofounder of the Meadowlark Institute, was invited to facilitate the board retreat for the North Dakota Humanities Council in June 2009, he walked into an association with a history of a revered founder who had carried a legendary vision of bringing humanities into the ranchlands. After a transition director, the council is now led by a dynamic young woman, Brenna Daugherty, who contacted Jerry with two desired outcomes for their annual board retreat: to reconnect the board with the mission of the Humanities Council and to reconnect the board and staff.

Jerry said, “The Humanities Council needed to decide what the organization is *now*. It also needed to define board responsibilities and commitments to the staff and the mission.” The group met in a hotel room in the city of Minot in a hotel basement conference room. In one half of the room, Jerry set up a large circle (for three staff, twelve board members, and one facilitator), and in the other half of the room placed round tables for smaller discussions. “For opening check-in, everyone brought two objects to place in the center: one personally symbolic of the state of North Dakota and the other representing something about the humanities. The staff had created a truly beautiful center, and the storytelling that emerged allowed the group to know all its members on a more personal level. I closed by reading a poem.”

It was a two-day retreat, organized as follows: day 1: circle, World Café, barbecue at the board chair’s home; day 2: circle check-in with talking piece around a topical question, adjourning to small tables for strategic planning process, and closing with circle and poetry. “At the end of the business time, the board practically rushed back to circle, eager to get back into this kind of interaction. It was all new to the board members, but Brenna later reported that they all considered it the best board retreat ever and made a commitment to continue meeting in circle.”

Even if only offered as a onetime experience, circle has the potential to change an organization by creating a sense of connectedness that had been lacking in the group. The host needs to be aware of this potential and have done the necessary prep work to provide support for the meaningful conversations that may be set in motion. That is why PJ, whose story was told in Chapter 3, took such a long time to go through her own preparation process before inviting other people into circle.