

## Going Round in Circles -- three RJ case studies.

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I wonder how many of us have left a meeting feeling that our contributions were not valued, opinions not listened to or even understood, and where only the loudest voices have been heard? I suspect that this is a familiar story for many of us.

How refreshing then to know that by making some very basic changes to the structure of a meeting, outcomes can be a positive experience for everyone involved. The circle process (sometimes known as peacemaking circles or circles of support) brings together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making or other activities in which honest communication, relationship development and community building are core desired outcomes.

Originally a Native American tradition, the circle incorporates elements of modern peacemaking and consensus building processes whilst drawing on both traditional wisdom and contemporary knowledge. The subtle changes require all participants to be seated on chairs in a complete circle with no barriers such as desks or tables present. The circle is facilitated by a keeper, (two or more keepers if the circle is large.) The keeper will open the circle, guide the process and keep track of the discussion, as well as summarising and documenting ideas and contributions before closing the circle. A talking piece; (something of significance and meaning to those taking part), is introduced and passed from person to person consecutively around the circle. The person holding the talking piece has the undivided attention of everyone else in the circle and can speak without interruption whilst all other participants respectfully listen.

Circles intentionally create a space that lifts barriers between people, opening fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration and mutual understanding. The process works because it brings people together in a way that allows them to see one another as individuals and to talk about what matters in an environment that promotes thoughtful reflection.

I had the opportunity to take part in three separate circle learning experiences as part of a Fulbright Scholarship in the USA in 2007; one as a trainee, one as an observer and one as a participant. At that time, as I witnessed the power of the circle, I could only hope that I would have the opportunity to put the learning experiences into practice back in the UK. Over the past weeks I have had the opportunity to facilitate three separate live circle meetings in my role as a Police officer in Leicestershire.

The first circle (**Case study 1**) directly involved young people at risk of exclusion from school. The next one (**Case study 2**) included concerned parents of a group of young people and the Police. Finally, the most recent example (**Case study 3**) was with representatives from the Somali and African Caribbean communities in Leicester. Some participants were parents of young people who have displayed extremely violent behaviour towards each other.

## **Case study 1**

A social enterprise group called U Hold (U Hold de Key) invited me to promote the concept of restorative justice to a group of seventeen boys aged between twelve and fifteen years, who all attend the same Leicester school and are at risk of exclusion due to behavioural issues. U Hold aims to meet the needs of marginalised or disadvantaged young people by responding to youth related anti social behaviour and raising educational aspiration and attainment by promoting social justice and inclusion. The young peoples educational attainments were as varied and diverse as their racial and religious backgrounds and a true reflection of Leicester's integrated community. The three U Hold workers agreed to assist me in the facilitation of the circle and we sat, evenly distributed, as part of the circle. The talking piece was a microphone and was the inspired choice of one of the workers who recognised the boys love of rap music. After a round of introductions, the task for the next round was for the group to set their own ground rules for the circle. Not only did they very quickly grasp the basic rules of the circle but there was 100% engagement as they gave careful thought and consideration to their individual contributions.

Statements, such as challenge, with respect and honour, loyalty, accept constructive feedback and understand each others differences were but a small sample of the very focussed responses highlighting the intelligence and previously unseen potential of these youngsters. The meaning of community prompted an interesting and encouraging discussion whereby the concept of family in a variety of contexts such as school and sports, in their minds equates to the same thing. As this circle took place at the time of the UK general election, one of the group coincidentally recognised through the circle process the significance and relevant connection to the subjects of democracy and debate thereby generating yet another important learning experience. The group then enthusiastically contributed to the re-development of their school behaviour code. Feedback from the group following their first ever circle experience was interesting. The younger ones felt that the duration of the circle was too long (I would suggest that my inexperience as a facilitator could have been a key factor here); also, that they struggled somewhat with the concept, although this did not seem apparent at the time. Most of the older boys also felt that the circle went on for too long but did recognise that in order to effect change this was the process that needs to take place.

## **Case Study 2**

This circle took place in the library of a community centre and participants consisted of parents (two of whom are youth workers) of a group of young people, and Police representatives, including local beat officers. Calls to the Police from local residents regarding incidents of low level anti social behaviour by these young people have recently increased and tensions were high following a number of stop and search checks carried out on the young people by the Police in relation to these incidents. One of the young men had recently been arrested on suspicion of assaulting a Police Officer. Pepper spray was used during the arrest and the young man's father had lodged a complaint about the Police handling of the situation.

At the beginning of the circle meeting I made it very clear that this particular matter was under investigation and therefore could not be discussed. The talking piece was a

book about family and community. After introductions, participants were invited to speak about the main issues and concerns affecting them. The parents perceived a lack of resources and facilities available for the young people in the area which created boredom. They also felt that the Police were antagonising the situation by using purely punitive methods with the young people when dealing with residents complaints. The Police Officers explained that frequently when they tried to engage the young people in conversation, they received abuse, bad language, even occasional spitting, in return. The Police also explained that if they ignore the young people the residents would say there's no point in reporting anything to the Police as they do nothing anyway. At this stage I pointed out that as local residents had not been invited to this circle meeting, it was only fair to represent some of their views. One of the local officers had asked a cross section of residents (including a young person) the same question; What's it like to live around here? All comments were negative and one in particular began; "This is a horrible place to live at the minute. They are terrorising us. The kids have no respect, they are intimidating and aggressive." These words clearly had a significant impact on the parents and reflected in the final circle round where they (and the Police) were asked for ideas on how some of these issues can be resolved. Ideas began to flow and once again the cohesive effect of the circle process allowed participants to believe that they were not alone with the problems and that individual ownership and responsibility from everyone concerned (including the young people) and a willingness to work together to improve their community can be a powerful tool.

A circle meeting to include the young people is planned. They will be encouraged to share their ideas and to contribute to the planning of community events and projects discussed at the initial meeting. Coincidentally, as a direct result of this meeting, the complaint against the Police was withdrawn and a healing process is now beginning.

### **Case Study 3**

This circle meeting was held in the Town Hall in Leicester. I was invited to facilitate a gathering of six parents from the African Caribbean community and six parents from the Somali community, all currently living in the same area in Leicester. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss an incident at a local college back in February 2010. That event was between their children which had involved knives and had culminated in one young person being attacked and seriously injured with a machete. Tensions had been rising between these young people for some time, the basis of which appeared to be religious and gang related rivalry between the two cultures. The parents had specifically asked that no Police were present at the meeting. The local Police Inspector, however, asked one of the community leaders whether it would be acceptable for me to facilitate the meeting.

He explained that although I was a Police Officer, I was also trained to independently facilitate circle meetings and that this particular process is likely to be more effective, given the sensitivity of the issues, than a conventional setting. This was agreed, as well as allowing the local beat officer (wearing a civilian jacket) to be outside of the circle (therefore not contributing to the discussion), taking notes on a flip chart to be handed to the group at the end of the meeting. In spite of the initial brief of twelve parents, a total of twenty three people attended; some parents, some agency representatives. The atmosphere was tense from the beginning and became more so after

introductions had been made. The next question for the circle was about identifying the key issues. Initially, the focus of their anger revolved around the perceived lack of support from statutory agencies i.e., School, Social Services, Council etc; but mainly the Police.

In twenty three years of Police service I can honestly say that I have never felt so vulnerable, disliked and impotent as I did during that next hour as the talking piece went from one angry person to the next. The verbal insults from the majority of those present about the organisation to which I belong were difficult to listen to, but this was not my meeting. I sensed that to have contributed in any way other than facilitation would have been inappropriate and unwelcome. Cultural differences between their two communities were alluded to, but did not seem to be a major or even insurmountable issue for them. It also became very clear that one of their biggest fears was that their children would be seriously injured or even killed if the issues were left unresolved.

The final matter for discussion was about how these issues could be resolved and by whom. The power of the circle came into its own. Ownership and parental responsibility in terms of role modeling and mentoring between the two communities proved to be a fascinating debate. Events such as a picnic day and joint sports fixtures between parents and young people from both communities and genders were enthusiastically discussed. One Somali mother expressed concerns that whilst we were at a meeting discussing the future, their children could be out there killing each other. She then followed this comment with a suggestion that the children should be brought together just as we all are now and taught to understand the harm that they are causing. At this point I broke the circle rule and interrupted her to explain that what she had just described was called restorative justice and that with good quality training, this is achievable. I then offered RJ training (and any further circle facilitation), to anyone interested in working this way, At least six people raised their hands in a show of support. The remainder of this circle meeting (duration; three hours) saw these two communities coming together as concerned parents with the same goals and hopes for the future of their families. They exuded a sense of empowerment that is the magic of the circle.