



THE POWER OF CIRCLES

PROMOTING TRUST AND HEALING IN THE SOCIAL AND PUBLIC SECTORS

AMBASSADOR INSIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

In today's complicated world, there's a great need for community, connection, and trust. Long-standing social problems that have traditionally divided our society are being elevated, exacerbated, and inflamed. There's no consensus on how to deal with racism, police brutality, growing health and economic crises, and the insurrection at the Capitol. Large-scale protests, fights about masks and vaccinations, and political divisions have sharpened. To many, nothing feels safe.

Funders, nonprofit leaders, and those in the public sector discuss important topics such as strategy, finances, data, and outcomes. And leaders are also discussing ways to advance equity and inclusion through their team, program designs, feedback, and budgets. Some individuals and organizations are attempting to take their discussions to another level. They're acknowledging that we live in a country that needs to heal, repair, connect, and rebuild trust. They're creating "circles" of safety, trust, truth, and peacemaking that focus on listening, building trusted relationships, and taking action. Will it solve all problems? No, but it's an approach, rooted in ancient tradition, that allows individuals to have meaningful conversations on tough issues.

Why circles? Circles represent wholeness, unity, and balance. Every point of the circumference is the exact same distance from the center, signaling equality. A circle is a connected line without breaks. It's also a sacred symbol of enlightenment and spirituality. Think of a labyrinth, mandala, and the yin/yang. Native cultures have used circles as symbols representing something meaningful in life. So, what's the appeal?

It's all about relationship building based on trust that allows us to feel safe, helps us to be authentic, and promotes acceptance and healing. We'll explore how philanthropy leaders, nonprofit leaders, and a government agency use the circle process.

CIRCLE OF TRUST WITH PHILANTHROPY LEADERS

Leaders, by default, are busy. They're juggling multiple programs, tasks, initiatives, and personnel. Many leaders look for different ways to re-energize and take care of their bodies, minds, and souls so they can continue to work with passion for their mission. It's important for leaders to come together to share, vent, listen, and support each other with others who know what it's like to be in their position.

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One group of philanthropic leaders and Leap Ambassadors, **Darin McKeever**, **Jenn Rothberg**, and **Adam Simon**, embarked on a path to nurture their own growth and development, using The Circle of Trust® approach. They make the case that self-awareness isn't enough and that they really need to do the work in community. Simon was looking for something beyond generic advice about leader challenges and found a group of peers who drives him to be the kind of leader that he aspires to be.

Parker Palmer, founder of the [Center for Courage and Renewal](#), says, “If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long: we need trustworthy relationships to sustain us, tenacious communities of support, to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a ‘Circle of Trust.’”¹

In the Circle of Trust, people find safe space to nurture personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it. It's based on [principles](#) that help us see ourselves whole. Palmer makes the observation that we don't know much about how to create spaces that invite the soul to show up (versus our intellect, emotions, or even ego), but there are specific [practices](#) that help guide a group. For additional information, Palmer's [A Hidden Wholeness](#) is a great resource.

The Circle of Trust approach takes courage and honesty; trust and confidentiality are absolute pre-conditions. Rothberg says, “To be our best selves, we need to fully embrace the idea of living an undivided life, a life where soul and role are one in the same. And yet, the reality is, this isn't something you can achieve on your own, inside your own head or heart. We need others to help us wrestle with and explore the natural tensions that arise between the two over the course of a career.”

The group emphasizes the importance of confidentiality and trust—a protective space to bare your soul. Trust builds over time by meeting regularly, reaffirming confidentiality, sharing in vulnerable ways which help others to become vulnerable, and responding with support and empathy. For these leaders, it's not about giving advice, fixing a problem, or saving someone. The practice includes asking open, honest, non-leading questions. Parker says, “This way of being together is so countercultural that it requires clear explanation, steady practice, and gentle but firm enforcement...to keep us from reverting to business as usual.” As one person presents an issue, the others ask deep, curious questions that help the individual learn more about themselves, emerging patterns, and courageous decisions they need to make.

1 [A Hidden Wholeness](#)



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They all talk about how much they learn about themselves. Simon says, “I’ve done countless leadership development experiences in the past, and this is profoundly different. It has changed my leadership, making me more self-aware because of the journey with others.” It’s important to note that the process also centers on a call to action. They share, listen, ask, reflect, and then find the courage to act or make a decision that wasn’t clear, but is now apparent.

Here are some of their lessons learned:

- Trust is a precondition, especially around confidentiality
- We all have similar demons and conflicts within us
- Group text chats can deepen connection (e.g., what I’m grateful for, what I’m celebrating, joy, wins, struggles, supporting each other)
- Drink together, especially during a pandemic – this may not be for everyone, but...
- Self-awareness is insufficient; communal work is necessary (i.e., be on the journey with others).

These leaders say they have gained insight and made profound changes in their personal and professional lives. For Simon, the group has helped him to become more patient and realize that obstacles he identified as external were really internal. Beyond developing amazing personal friendships, he’s more able to take risks as he can “try on” strategies with the group before he brings them to a less-forgiving place. McKeever knows he has a group of people he can “send a bat signal when in need.” He knows they’ll respond with empathy and no judgment. Rothberg adds she has more courage and bravery to take leaps because she has people who have her back. She’s comforted knowing that she can show up in this sacred space as her real self and not worry about her livelihood or what they think of her because they don’t pass judgment. She says, “Find the courage to take this leap. Yes, it’s scary. But it’s worth it.”

They’ve been meeting for four years and said it just gets better over time. It’s not about a deliverable but rather where they are on their journeys. The group goes through phases or cycles. There are times when closeness or distance is needed, and intensity sometimes requires the balance of gratitude or joy. McKeever says, “We all contribute to the renewal, purpose, energy, and value with great intention. If we need closeness, we find a way to connect. If it’s a bit too intense, we make it lighter or find laughter.”

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A NONPROFIT USING PEACEMAKING CIRCLES

While some of us are looking for the next shiny new program design or cutting-edge technology, [Roca](#) is using peacemaking circles, an ancient practice derived from Aboriginal traditions. Roca heard about how peacemaking circles were used for restorative justice in parts of Canada and believed it was a powerful process that fostered accountability and healing and could benefit their program participants. Roca was taught circles by Aboriginal leaders from the Tagish Tlingit Nation in the Yukon and their partners. They taught the team so they could share with young people and their partners. **Molly Baldwin**, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, says, “It helps us create an alternative space for communication, understanding, and healing and often through very difficult conversations.”

Since 1988, Roca has been serving 16- to 24-year-olds who have experienced trauma and are the primary victims or drivers of urban violence. Its mission is “to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.” Many of the youth and young adults have had adverse childhood experiences that cause distrust in others and our societal systems. So, it seems like an unlikely group to participate in peacemaking circles. Yet, the youth and young adults gravitate toward it because many have found a safe and trusting environment—something that is rare in their lives.

The circle brings together individuals who wish to engage in conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making, or other activities in which honest communications, relationship development, and community building are core desired outcomes. “Circles” offer an alternative to contemporary meeting processes that often rely on hierarchy, win-lose positioning, and victim/rescuer approaches to relationships and problem solving. They bring people together in a way that creates trust, intimacy, good will, belonging, generosity, mutuality, and reciprocity. The process is never about “changing others,” but a gentle invitation to change one’s relationship with oneself, the community, and the wider universe.² The circle intentionally creates a sacred space, which helps remove barriers between people and open up fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration, and mutual understanding.³

In a circle, everyone is an equal part of the whole; there is no head, no hierarchy, no one sitting on the outside. We face each other as human beings, use only first names, and leave

2 [Circle Keepers Manual 2004](#)

3 [Community Youth Development Journal, Fall 2001](#)

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behind the titles that signify position. There is neither a table to hide behind nor a corner of the room to retreat to. Each participant is given equal respect, and all are encouraged to speak from their own hearts and experiences.⁴

Circles are also about incrementally shifting habits and practicing being in a different way with one another and ourselves. Circles develop participation, consensus, shared leadership, and problem-solving skills—all essential tools for genuine democracy and social justice. Circles also touch our spiritual core and help us see ourselves as part of a connected whole.⁵

Probably the most powerful aspect of the circle is the talking piece. Historically, it was something sacred like an eagle feather, but today any object with special meaning can be used. **Anisha Chablani-Medley**, Chief Program Officer at Roca, says, “Only the person holding the piece speaks, which gives each person a chance to speak their own truth and everyone else multiple, repeated opportunities to listen. It is in this light that they are seen and heard, and it provides the most incredible opportunity for the potential to challenge our own thoughts because we get to listen to so many other voices and the truths that they hold as well.” Although not every circle ends happy and flowery, the fact that each voice is so clearly and intently heard by others is transforming in and of itself.

Every circle develops its own values and principles, but most peacemaking circles:

- are designed by those who participate
- are guided by a shared vision
- call participants to act on their personal values
- include all interests and are accessible to all
- offer everyone an equal, and voluntary, opportunity to participate
- take a holistic approach, including the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual aspects
- maintain respect for all
- encourage exploring instead of conquering differences
- shared responsibility among the group
- invite accountability to others and to the process.⁶

4 [Community Youth Development Journal, Fall 2001](#)

5 [Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home](#)

6 [Circle Keepers Manual 2004](#)



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These values and principles are very important because most youth, especially Brown and Black youth, feel they aren't heard, their voices don't matter, and their opinions don't count or are misunderstood. It's important for organizations to increase the chances of reaching those who are disproportionately ignored, shunned, or discriminated against by society and have great distrust of others and systems—for good reason. Baldwin says, "It's our commitment to put equity at the center of our work. It's always been there, but it's much more deliberate now."

Chablani-Medley says, "There is no one goal. Circles are about a way to be. It's about being able to seek greater understanding of ourselves and others and get to better agreements, personal accountability, and mutuality. Some circles are for learning, talking, and understanding while others are for resolving or healing from long-standing and deep-rooted conflict or historical trauma."

Peacemaking circles are also used with law enforcement professionals, probation officers, children and family services staff, and others. The Roca team identifies people within systems who are working with youth directly facing urban violence to build meaningful relationships and have hard conversations. They expect setbacks to be part of the change process, and always work toward better outcomes. For some, it may be difficult to imagine a police officer holding a talking piece when communicating with youth. But it happens and it helps break down barriers of roles, connect individuals to their humanity first, and build some trust and relationships. Chablani-Medley quotes [Dr. Alisha Moreland Capua](#): "Systems change when people change, and people change when they feel something." Circles help people feel.

Chablani-Medley says, "The greatest challenge in implementing peacemaking circles is people's expectations that whatever the 'it' is can be fixed by the process itself and in a timeframe. The circle is the container. It may need to be filled and emptied multiple times and it is all dependent on what's in it and who is willing to carry it back and forth until it is no longer necessary. Real healing and transformation take time."

Shirley Marcus Allen agrees that peacemaking circles can be a very powerful intervention for youth. As a consultant with Venture Philanthropy Partners, she helped assess the effectiveness of the [Credible Messenger Program](#) implemented within the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. The Peacemaking Circle was a part of each group session and included youth, parents/guardians, and service providers. She says, "I saw firsthand the impact the model had on helping to resolve long-standing and deep-rooted trauma."



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CIRCLES OF TRUTH IN CITY GOVERNMENT

Mayor **Jim Kenney** and the City of Philadelphia used healing circles to facilitate police reform efforts. Initiated by the Mayor, Police Commissioner **Danielle Outlaw**, and the City's Pathways to Reform, Transformation, and Reconciliation, they held a number of healing circles with the public to have brave and difficult conversations after a series of local and national killings of Black people by law enforcement.

Circles of Truths, held in November 2020, was a crucial part of a city-wide effort called Pathways to Reform, Transformation, and Reconciliation. This initiative brought together City staff, as well as community leaders, to guide the City's response to racial injustices and inequities. Embedded in this response was the recognition that the City needed to engage the community in both listening and action. **Cynthia Figueroa**, Deputy Mayor, City of Philadelphia Office of Children and Families, says, "The community engagement included working collaboratively with City and community partners to foster conversations between institutions and residents to address structural racism and racial inequity issues in Philadelphia. Specifically, the Circles were intended to create an environment where everyone was on an even playing field—no titles, just one human talking to one another."

The [first Circles of Truths](#) was created as a response to the killing of **Walter Wallace, Jr.** by the Philadelphia police, an incident that sparked widespread protests and civil unrest, deployment of the National Guard, and a citywide curfew. The City's Office of Public Engagement led the effort developing the Circles of Truth model. They convened a virtual event in November 2020 centered on truth-sharing, grief, and building a space for healing, discussion, and listening as they collaboratively work toward building an equitable future for all. The goal of the event was to share personal experiences, show empathy, and discuss how to build bridges between residents, officials, and law enforcement. All participants were encouraged to be vulnerable and to see and value vulnerability in others. This process allowed residents, Mayor Kenney, and Police Commissioner Outlaw to be seen as individuals with deep feelings about racial equity and reform.

The Circles of Truth event began with a group of City leaders modeling the open and candid conversations they wanted to facilitate with community members. Participants broke out into smaller breakout rooms for discussion that demonstrated key principles of listening and hearing every person's perspective. Trained moderators and facilitators

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gathered feedback and reported these findings to the full group in closing. The City released a survey to solicit thoughts and feedback from more than 150 people who participated in the event.

Many of those who participated found it valuable and a step in the right direction. Below is a response from a participant:

“It’s a rare opportunity to hear from leaders about how the challenges they have faced and the decisions they make impact them personally, deeply and so heartfelt. This year we as a nation and a city have faced an incredible number of challenges and hardships. I think there is nothing more important to influencing change than to have people talking with each other—really talking and listening and hearing each other. To see that we are all people who only want the best for each other and our city. I very much appreciate you starting the conversation.”

Just as other circles focus on changing self and taking action, it’s clear that a government entity can’t rely on brave conversations alone. They must respond to residents’ feedback and experiences. The City of Philadelphia implemented several new action steps which can be found in the [Pathways to Reform, Transformation and Reconciliation: 2020-2021 Year-End Review](#). Some of the highlights include training more than half of the police force so far in Crisis Intervention; banning the use of teargas at demonstrations; prohibiting chokeholds and other means of excessive force; adding \$18 million to anti-violence efforts; reallocating \$33 million from police budget; making Juneteenth and Indigenous People’s Day official city holidays; removing statues that symbolize racism; developing a Youth Advisory Commission as one way to engage with young people; and holding almost 150 community-driven townhalls and conversations with the police department.

One of the greatest challenges for Philadelphia is to continue promoting racial justice and equity, largely through the city government’s efforts, and sustain these meaningful conversations. It is important to keep moving work forward and to encourage these efforts through persistent dedication. Progress takes time, planning, and the will to build trust and drive change.

Over the last year, The City of Philadelphia’s Pathways to Reform, Transformation, and Reconciliation has held 21 community events, with more than 2,000 participants to build trust and connections between residents and city officials. These include a series of healing circles held throughout April and May 2021, modeled after Circles of Truths, and also developed a toolkit, ‘Care as First Response’ to provide insight for community members and organizations on practices in hosting their own healing circles.



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Figueroa says, “It is a significant amount of work to commit to and you need to prepare the city leaders to be vulnerable and listen to difficult feedback.” Creating a safe space, listening deeply, being vulnerable, and remaining open to different perspectives can make a huge difference in understanding each other better and offering an opportunity to create change together. These tools can help heal and be used as a pathway to reform, transformation, and reconciliation. For the City of Philadelphia, these tools are integral in a goal to build a more equitable future for all Philadelphians.

CONCLUSION

There are many ways in which leaders, organizations, and communities can build trust and deepen relationships. The Circles of Trust, Peacemaking Circles, and Circles of Truth are models that seem to be working. Commonalities that lead to success include a safe space, rituals, intense listening, trust building, deep questions, egalitarian philosophy, vulnerability, courage, and journeying together.

If you’re a leader, how are you inspiring trust in your team and stakeholders? As a nonprofit organization, what are you intentionally doing to build trust with your program participants and partners? If you’re a government official, what barriers can you identify in building trust within your community, region, or state? What are the options to create a safer more trusting environment for all citizens?

Is it time to reimagine how we communicate, listen, and interact with each other? Focus on the silenced voices? Put racial equity at the forefront? Become more trustworthy to earn others’ trust? Share some power? Create a safe space to bring others to the table?

Do we always need the hierarchy that exists in many of our institutions? Hierarchy may be appropriate in some situations, but do we need that in everything we do? All programs? Services? Courts? Government programs? Is there a place for more equality and doing work differently? Can we focus more on each other’s humanity?

There are no quick fixes, magic wands, or easy paths. Instead, there are many possibilities for us to use circles to create safe environments, trusting relationships, and opportunities for healing, growth, and justice. Where might a circle provide benefit to your work?

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