The Center Will Hold: An Overview of Circle Processes and Their Potential Use in Academic Medicine and Other Organizations

NATALIE C. FLEURY

ABSTRACT

The use of circles to nurture trust relationships is a practice see in many Indigenous cultures (Kaminski, 2011). Recently, circle processes have been used in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, justice systems, and other settings to address a variety of issues.

Effective circle processes create a safe space where everyone is respected and each participant has the opportunity to speak. A well-executed circle creates a receptacle that can hold strong emotions, encourages vulnerability and sharing, and creates a sense of connection and shared purpose.

This article focuses on adapting circles to address workplace issues in academic medical institutions. The article introduces the stages of a circle process, the general structure of circle processes, and important circle guidelines followed by an overview of five different models for circle processes. Application of these process are illustrated using a scenario and exploring how each process might be used to address issues arising from the scenario.

ABSTRACT

Circles are a powerful archetype. The use of circles as a place to develop community, nurture trust relationships, and solve community problems is an ancient practice see in many Indigenous cultures (Kaminski, 2011).[1] In more recent times, circle processes have been used in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, justice systems, and other settings to address a wide variety of issues.

Effective circle processes create a safe space where everyone is respected and each participant has the opportunity to speak. A well-executed circle creates a receptacle that can hold strong emotions, encourages vulnerability and sharing, and creates a sense of connection and shared purpose.

This article focuses on adapting circle processes to address workplace issues in academic medical institutions. The article introduces the stages of a circle process, the general structure of circle processes, and important circle guidelines, followed by an overview of five different models for circle processes. Application of these process will be illustrated using a scenario and exploring how each process might be used by an ombuds office to address issues arising from the scenario.

INTRODUCTION

Humans have been gathering in circles since fire became a sustaining aspect of our ancestors' existence. Archaeological finds suggest that human ancestors harnessed fire more than 800,00 years ago (Stepka et al., 2022). Gathering in a circle around a fire offered not only opportunities to share food, warmth, and safety, it also offered early hominids the opportunity to develop community. Link the role of fire in human evolution with the development of language some 280,000 years ago (Perreault and Mathew, 2012), and it is not hard to imagine early *homo sapiens* gathering in a circle around the fire to discuss a pressing issue or resolve a conflict between members of the group. Think back to a time you were seated in a circle around a campfire, on the floor of a classroom, on the playground, or in a meeting. Now think about where circles appear in your daily life: the rim of a glass, the wheel of your car, a picture of the sun, a cake baked for a celebration. We are naturally drawn to circles; there is no head and no foot, the form lends itself to a sense of equality, of egalitarianism. The use of circles as a place to develop community, nurture trust relationships, and solve community problems is an ancient practice seen in many Indigenous cultures. Talking circles are deeply embedded in the traditions of the First Nations people of Canada, many Native American tribes in the United States, and other indigenous communities (Kaminski, 2011).

In more recent times, circle processes are being used in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, justice systems, and other settings to address a wide variety of issues. There are many types of circles: Talking Circles, Circles of Understanding, Circles of Trust© (Palmer, 2004), Check-in Circles, Healing Circles, Community Building Circles, Harm Circles, Conflict Circles, Sentencing Circles, Restorative Justice Circles, and Reintegration Circles, to name but a few (Pranis, 2005). Effective circle processes create a safe space where everyone is respected and each participant has the opportunity to speak, without interruption. In an ideal circle setup, each person is situated in space in equal relationship to the rest of the group. A well-executed circle creates a space for holding strong emotions, encouraging vulnerability and sharing, and creating a sense of connection and shared purpose.


[1] The author wishes to acknowledge that this article was written on land that was the original homeland of Indigenous People, including the Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee. The use of talking circles can be traced through the ancestral traditions of many of these peoples, traditions which are being adapted to improve the health and well-being of both native and non-native communities.

The idea of using circles in healthcare is not new; the concept has been introduced as a method for improving diabetes care for indigenous populations, increasing multicultural awareness (Running Wolf and Rickard, 2011), and studied as a means for reducing healthcare costs for Native American populations (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). This article will focus on adapting circle processes focused on communication, relationship building, and conflict resolution to address workplace issues in academic medical institutions. The article will introduce the stages of a circle process, the general structure of circle processes, and important circle guidelines. This introduction will be followed by an overview of five different models for circle processes. Application of these processes will be illustrated using a scenario and exploring how each process might be used to address issues arising from the scenario. The conclusion will provide some additional thoughts on how to go about instituting circle processes on an institutional level.

IN THE ROUND: THE BASIC STRUCTURE AND ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CIRCLE PROCESS

This section of the article will outline the basic circle process. Baldwin and Linnea refer to the "bones of the circle process," using the metaphor of a skeletal system to describe the structure which allows the group to move in certain ways and restrains it from moving in others (2010, p.16). The basic structure, "the bones" can be fleshed out in different ways while still retaining a recognizable form. As Baldwin (1998) and Pranis (2005) describe, a circle process has both structural elements and preparatory elements. At the most basic level, a circle process has five basic physical parts: a ring of chairs, a center, a 'bell,' a talking piece, and a group of willing participants. In addition to the physical elements of the circle, a true circle process has particular chronological components that differentiate it from a group of people simply sitting around a center point having a discussion.
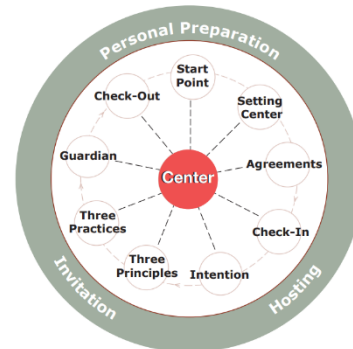
THE PHYSICAL CIRCLE AND THE CENTER

The purpose of seating the group in a circle is simple: everyone should be able to see everyone who is present and be able to hear and see who is speaking. According to Pranis (2005) the circle format "symbolizes shared leadership, equality, connection, and inclusion" (p. 11). The circle shape itself does not need to be perfectly spherical, the goal is to make the participants feel they are part of one group. There are numerous options for adapting a circle to the available space as long as the group adheres to the basic tenets of seeing, hearing, and the ability for participants to feel fully engaged. Baldwin and Linnea (2010) describe one group that would begin their meetings in a circle around a center for the opening and check-in, would move to a table for the agenda-based portion of the meeting, and would return to the circle for the closing portion. Another large group would start in a big circle and then break into smaller groups (p. 21).

During the circle process portion of a meeting, there should not be a physical barrier (such as a table) between participants sitting across from one another, though a low center with objects that have meaning to the group may be appropriate. For a circle process held in the fall, participants were invited to bring something that symbolized autumn and the harvest, creating a center vivid with colorful autumn leaves, acorns, a shiny apple, a small gourd, and a small sheaf of wheat. A meeting with a business focus might see a center populated with items that represent a mission or vision statement, a rendering of a logo, or an item that each participant brings that symbolizes their

personal contribution to the organization. In an academic medical center, a caduceus, an Erlenmeyer flask, or any item that an individual associates with the organization's mission or the purpose of the meeting would be appropriate.

Placing something meaningful in the center helps participants visualize the purpose of the group and provides a neutral focal point where participants can direct their gaze when the process encounters challenging comments and ideas. The details regarding the importance of the center will be discussed more fully in Section III. Issues of accessibility should be addressed as part of the planning process, as outlined later in this section.

THE 'BELL" AND THE TALKING PIECE

The 'bell' can be any type of gentle sound that can be used to begin the process, signal the end of a discussion or meditative period, bring people back after a break, and signal the closing of the session. A singing bowl, a songbird sound from a phone app, finger cymbals, and three note chime bars are all options for the "bell." The "bell" is part of the ceremonial aspects of the circle and should be a gentle, not jarring, signal for the group.

The talking piece is an extremely useful tool. The concept originates from the "talking stick" process used by many Indigenous cultures (Kaminski, 2011). A tribal elder would begin a discussion and then hold out the talking stick so whomever wanted to speak could be heard. The talking stick would be passed around the group until everyone who wished to speak had done so. There are examples of talking sticks used by ethnic groups in Western Africa, the Māori culture in New Zealand, and by Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast in North America, to name just a few (Kaminski, 2011, Flett, 2022). The physical object should relate somehow to the work of the group whenever possible. It should be an object that is easily passed from person to person and should be pleasant to hold.

If the group is meeting remotely or is wary of passing an object from person to person, there can be agreement made about how to pass the conversation around the circle. A clear gesture, such as hand on heart, or the hand emoji available in many online meeting platforms, are options that could be employed to signal readiness to move on to the next person.

North American Talking Stick
Smithsonian Institution Collection
Catalog Number 26/9069

THE HOST AND THE GUARDIAN

To be truly effective, a circle process must be hosted. While various names may be used to identify this role, such as guardian, circle keeper, steward, or host, the person taking on these responsibilities should not be seen as a dominant leader. The host is not responsible for controlling the process as much as they are responsible for creating a safe space for the participants to engage in the process. The entire group is responsible for holding the circle; the host is there to make sure the process is safe and to maintain the general tenor of the circle process. The host is also a participant in the process, contributing their own thoughts and ideas. Depending on the size of the circle, it may be appropriate to have two hosts. Being able to relinquish control is a valuable trait in a host. An example of a circle keeper's oath used in a peer led circle process is included in the Appendix.

While the host may take on the role of the guardian, it is often helpful to have a separate individual in this role. The guardian is a more observational role since they are responsible for monitoring the contributions and energy of every participant. According to Christina Baldwin (1998), *"the guardian has the group's permission to interrupt and intercede in a group process for the purpose of calling the circle back to center, to task, or to respectful practice, or suggesting a needed break"* (p. 75). To

fulfill their role, the guardian is the keeper of the bell, the person who monitors the dynamics in the circle, and the person who makes sure the circle process unfolds in keeping with the guidelines or covenants set by the group. Anyone may ask the host to ring the bell at any time. Whenever the guardian rings the bell, the host or the person requesting the bell should explain the reason: "*I am not sure we're all listening carefully enough*" or "*I think this would be a suitable time to take a short break*." The guardian may also use the bell to call for a moment of silence for people to contemplate a recent comment or revelation, or to help the group recenter after a break.

CHECK IN AND CLOSING

The beginning of the circle process should always include a check-in. There are a number of important reasons why this component should be included: it sets the tone for the process, giving each participant a chance to settle into the circle so they bring their full attention, it provides insights into where they are or what they are feeling as the circle commences, and check-in prepares the group to both share and receive thoughts and insights. The host typically begins the check in process by ringing the bell, followed by a prompt for the group. As discussed at more length in the next section, different circle processes will call for different check-in processes. For example, Circles of Trust© prompts may be poems or short inspirational quotes. For the Circle Way, the host may ask a question that helps center the group, such as "briefly share what brought you here today." The talking piece or talking signal is passed from person to person around the circle and, while it is permissible to pass the talking piece without contributing, ideally no one passes during the check-in process.

Closing is equally important. In a high-functioning circle, people have brought their attention and their energy, and they need to know when it is time to refocus that attention and energy. Asking everyone for a brief comment on what they learned, something new that struck them, something they appreciated, or something they will be taking with them can be an effective prompt for the closing. Considering the purpose of the circle, closing with a quote, poem, or brief silence may be appropriate. The session is then closed using the bell.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

As discussed in the next section, circles can be convened for many reasons and can take many forms. Not all circles need to reach a final decision, however, if a circle process is intended to help a group reach a decision, the ideal decision-making process is consensus building. In this context, consensus does not mean that everyone must agree with the decision; it means everyone is willing to "live with the decision and support its implementation." (Pranis, 2005, p. 37) In *The Circle Way*, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea outline a thumb vote process:

      Thumbs up = I'm for it
      Thumbs sideways = I still have a question
      Thumbs down = I don't think this is the right way for us to go (p. 32).

Based on the result of the vote, additional clarification or discussion may ensue. A thumbs down does not necessarily mean there will not be consensus. Making room for hesitant or dissenting opinions is one of the strengths of a circle process. After sufficient conversation, the thumbs down vote may become a "I don't support the action, but I support the group." (Baldwin& Linnea, 2010, p. 32).

If the circle is convened to help address an issue or a problem, there should be agreement on the decision-making process at the outset of the discussion. That allows the group to move forward to a predictable process, rather than having any unthinking responses when the decision-making phase starts. Perhaps the group is most comfortable with a democratic, majority prevails approach. A group

may decide that an anonymous vote is appropriate, though there will need to be a process for people to voice their concerns. A circle idealist may feel that if a group does not feel safe with an open decision-making process, the circle has not been truly effective. Looking at it from another angle, there are many aspects of group dynamics that may make an anonymous vote more palatable, particularly in a rigidly hierarchical setting or where certain people may feel disempowered. Other groups may decide a consensus minus one makes sense so no one person can block a decision (Baldwin& Linnea, 2010, p. 32).

THE ROUND UP

This section will explore four different circle models: the Circle Way (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010), Circles of Trust©, (Palmer, 2004), 3 Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide (Hancock & Henderson, 2019), and a basic circle process used by the University of Minnesota. (Morse, 2021) This section will also touch on the concept of a Clearness Committee (Palmer, 2004).

  THE CIRCLE WAY

Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea expanded on the use of circles in an organization setting in their book *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (2010). Building on the basic circle processes listed in Section II of this article, the authors outline principles and practices that tailor the circle process for business settings. These types of circles can be recurring or one-time processes, or multi-day processes convened to address a discrete issue or business need.

Baldwin and Linnea (2010) stress the importance of intention in a circle process: "Intention is the understood agreement of why people are present, what they intend to have happen, and what they commit to doing and experiencing together." (pp. 25-26) The host is often setting the intention and inviting the participants. The intention may be concrete, visionary, or ideological, or a combination. The intention might be focused on a tangible outcome, such as developing a budget, improving the culture in a particular department, or a broader goal such as addressing social determinants of health in a particular neighborhood. As the circle process unfolds, the intention may evolve. Each member of the circle arrives with their own personal intent, and the circle process helps balance the personal needs and the collective needs:

> "There is something each person wants to have happen; there is something the group wants to create. When these two energies emerge and co-exist, the circle really steps into a sense of self" (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 26).

The Circle Way also emphasizes three principles and three practices. The three principles are rotating leadership, sharing responsibility, and relying on what the authors characterize as wholeness. Rotating leadership means not only the roles of host and guardian and scribe are important, it also means every member of the circle comes with a sense of self-determination, volunteerism, and attending to common needs. Sharing responsibility focuses on every participant watching out for the process and watching for what needs to be done or said to safeguard the quality of the experience. For example, "guardian, can you ring the bell? I think that last comment was significant, and we all need to take a moment to process what has been said," or "I think we might be going off on a tangent and we need to decide whether we're going to refocus the discussion or continue down this path." Reliance on wholeness acknowledges that the circle process consists of individual contributions made by the participants *and* the particular energy generated by being in circle together.

The three practices relate to how to speak, listen, and act in the circle. The first principle, attentive listening, or listening to understand rather than respond, is a key practice for any type of circle.

Attentive listening differs from active listening in that attentive listening does not call for the listener to provide the same cues that active listening typically calls for, such as eye contact, paraphrasing back, and summarizing what was heard. Attentive listening asks the listener to be fully receptive to the speaker's thoughts, feelings and stories, withholding judgment and refraining from listening in order to respond. This is another place where the center can be a valuable tool. Focusing on the center rather than the speaker can bring a participant into a place of deeper listening and may allow them to connect to some of what is being said even if there is disagreement. Attentive listening brings the circle into deep inquiry rather than just dialogue or debate (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, pp. 27-28).

The second principle is speaking with intention. Intentional speaking goes to speaking one's own truth to the circle, "noticing when the truth that is ours to say may be received, and then to say it, avoiding blame and judgment" (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 28). It also means speaking to what is relevant and meaningful at that moment in the circle. Whenever possible, intentional speaking uses neutral language, leaving value judgments and criticism of others outside of the circle. The choice of language also affects the third practice, attending to the well-being of the group. In circle, it is important to think about the impact of words and actions before, during, and after speaking. Linnea and Baldwin (2010) suggest a few typical questions to ask oneself before speaking:

> What is my motivation or hope for sharing this?
> What is my body telling me – am I feeling tension, excitement, fear?
> How do I offer my contribution in a beneficial way?
> How do I need to consider what I say, before I say it, and still speak my "truth?" (p. 28).

One other aspect of the Circle Way is the use of a scribe. While not always necessary, if the group wants to keep track of insights and the progress of the group, assigning a scribe can be an appropriate step. The scribe does not take the minutes of the meeting; they sit in an observational role and take down particularly important statements, insights and decisions for the group. While individuals are encouraged to have their own way of tracking their thoughts during the process, such as a journal held in their lap, the scribe captures the essence of the discussion and any significant breakthroughs. As an example, if the group chooses to close the circle with a question such as "what is your takeaway today," the scribe, with the permission of the group, may transcribe each individual comment, anonymously or with attribution, as a culmination of the work of the group (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 30).

CIRCLES OF TRUST©

Circles of Trust© are also created with intentionality and are most often convened on a regular basis with a set group of participants meeting over a period of time. These types of circles work best when there is a described endpoint (Palmer, 2004). With an endpoint, people can determine for themselves if the process is beneficial and can either gracefully exit at the endpoint or renew the participation and carry on with those who wish to continue.

One of the main things that sets Circles of Trust© apart from other models is a particular set of guidelines: "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight" (Palmer, 2004, p. 114). The author participated in a circle of trust that reinterpreted these guidelines as "no fixing, no judging, no setting each other straight." The goal for this kind of circle is to create a safe space for individuals to share and explore, using open ended questions and prompts. Circles of Trust create space for people to explore their own thoughts and feelings about an issue or concern rather than jumping to immediate problem solving.

> "So, what do we do in a circle of trust? . . .[W]e speak our own truth, we listen receptively to the truth of others; we ask each other honest, open questions instead of giving counsel; and we offer each other the healing and empowering gifts of silence and laughter" (Palmer, 2004, p. 116).

Another key component for this circle process is the use of silence. When an individual shares an insight, or a particular question is put to the circle, cultivating silence allows each participant to experience their own insights or revelations, or be inspired to ask a follow up question to inform the discussion. The center can be a particularly powerful tool in a circle of trust process; people can use the center as focus while they share a difficult thought or comment, and it also gives people a place to focus their gaze when a facilitator calls for a moment of silence.

A Circle of Trust© can be as few as 2 people, with an outside limit of 25 participants (Palmer, 2004, p. 73). This type of circle requires a leader or facilitator who can create the safe space needed for the type of exploration best suited to Circles of Trust.© The facilitator, unlike the guardian role discussed above, is a full participant in the process. To be a facilitator-participant, one should have some specific training in creating safe spaces (Center for Courage and Renewal, n.d.).
When Circles of Trust© are used in an organizational setting, it is imperative that participation be voluntary. This type of circle is focused on personal growth and creating a space where people can find their own inspiration and their own "truth;" such work needs to be entered in voluntarily and cannot be required or coerced.

The main components of this type of circle process are the same as those outlined in Section II: a circle, a center, a talking piece or signal, a host/facilitator, a bell. The difference lies in the intentionality and a deep commitment to confidentiality. By creating a safe space for participants to explore their own hopes, beliefs, and needs, a Circle of Trust© fosters stronger relationships and cultivates true teamwork.

3PRACTICES FOR CROSSING THE DIFFERENCE DIVIDE

The creators of the 3Practice Circles describe it as a process for "creating safe spaces to talk about unsafe things." The goal is not agreement – the goal is sharing viewpoints and gaining clarity, so the group knows how to treat each other moving forward (Hancock & Henderson, 2019).
3 Practices has a deceptively simple three step formula:

1) I will practice being unusually interested in others.
2) I will stay in the room with difference.
3) I will stop comparing my best with your worst (p. 4).

A 3Practice circle begins with a framing question, and a volunteer begins the discussion by talking for 2 minutes. Once the volunteer finishes, the rest of the group begins to ask questions always starting with "I'd be curious to know." The volunteer gets 60 seconds to answer each clarifying question, and a facilitator makes sure the process moves along so multiple volunteers are given the opportunity to respond to the framing question (Hancock & Henderson, 2019).
A clarifying question must be non-judgmental. "I'd be curious to know where you got that idiotic idea" would not be acceptable in a 3Practices Circle; "I'd be curious to know more about the information that led you to that conclusion" would be. The volunteer gets 60 seconds to answer each clarifying question, and a facilitator makes sure the process moves along so multiple volunteers are given the opportunity to respond to the framing question. Follow-up questions are allowed; Hancock and Henderson find that follow-up questions can be powerful in this setting; a follow-up question shows genuine curiosity and signals that the asker is listening closely (p. 29). An interesting by-product of the model is the group begins working together to be sure the clarifying questions meet the

guidelines, chiming in if the questioner forgets to begin with "I'd be curious to know" and to help reframe clarifying questions that may be too judgmental (Hancock & Henderson, 2019).

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA'S BASIC CIRCLE PROCESS

Jan Morse, the former Director of the Center for Student Conflict Resolution at the University of Minnesota, has developed a circle format to "provide participants with an opportunity to engage in a respectful, carefully structured way that provides for maximum understanding, empowerment and connection" (Morse, 2021). A "trained guide" that is external to the group meets with participants in advance to identify the purpose of the circle and to set guidelines for the interactions (Morse, 2021). During the pre-meeting phase, the group develops a statement of purpose, for example:

> "The purpose of the Circle is: To develop and maintain a positive and supportive environment where _____ support each other through respectful and professional interactions in order to create an inclusive climate of open communication, trust, and respect" (Morse, 2021).

This statement can be reviewed and revised by the group however they wish, with the option to add any guidelines the group deems important. The guide goes over expectations and discusses what might be helpful and what is important as the group works to schedule the session. The guidelines may include more detailed expectations:

> "This is a voluntary process. Everyone in the space is part of the circle. Our contributions are held confidentially by the group. Phones and other electronics are stowed. Speak from the heart, listen from the heart. Respect your turn; speak or pass, as you wish. Say as much as you need to say while giving others the time to do the same. Recognize the inherent dignity of all people" (Morse, 2021).

When the group convenes, the process follows a set out script to provide some consistency across circle processes. The script outlines the following steps:

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Purpose
3. Opening Ceremony
4. Mindfulness Moment
5. Introduce Talking Protocol
6. Guidelines
7. Check-In Round
8. Round 1
9. Round 2
10. Round 3
11. Round 4
12. Round 5
13. Round 6
14. Check out

Each round focuses on a particular question or opportunity for reflection informed by the reason the circle was convened. Examples include "Share an experience or insight that has helped you be successful as an (advanced learner, student, employee, faculty, etc.)" and "What strengths have you seen in yourself and in others as people have gone through the difficulties of the past year." A final question goes something like "What is one thing that you can commit to doing that will support respectful and professional interactions in the _____." Should the group decide at the outset that they want a record of the interactions, a keeper keeps track of the contributions and the final commitments (Morse, 2021).

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CLEARNESS COMMITTEES

Clearness Committees are a Quaker tradition dating back more than three hundred years. While the Circle of Trust© process is heavily influenced by the clearness committee concept, additional aspects will be summarized here with additional information about the application of this type of process is discussed in Section IV.

The central tenet of a Clearness Committee is the fact that each person has an inner teacher that can guide us to deal with our problems or issues, and this inner wisdom is often obscured by inward and outward interference The Clearness Committee process helps an individual tap into that inner voice by creating a safe space, avoiding giving advice or "fixing" a situation; members of the committee may only speak to ask "honest, probing, caring, challenging, open, unloaded questions"(Hoffman, 1996). Similar to the 3 Practices process, the focus person submits a specific matter to the Committee, preferably in advance of the Committee meeting, providing a precise statement and any relevant background factors and any inklings of what might lie ahead. This process is valuable for both the focus person and the Committee (Hoffman, 1996).

Committee members are encouraged to ask questions that are brief and to the point at a gentle, relaxed pace. The goal is not to pepper the focus person through a cross-examination style questioning process; rather the idea to is to cultivate thoughtful questions and responses, and extended moments of silence that allow for deep reflection:

> "The purpose of committee members is not to give advice or to "fix" the situation; they are there to listen without prejudice or judgment, to help clarify alternatives, to help communication if necessary, and to provide emotional support as an individual seeks to find "truth and the right course of action." The committee must remember that people are capable of growth and change. They must not become absorbed with historical excuses or reasons for present problems, but rather focus on what is happening now and explore what could be done to resolve it." (Hoffman, 1996).

Clearness Committees are likely to be more solemn than some of the other circle processes outlined in this article: the process is approached with intention and attention directed at the focus person. Normal group interactions such as chitchat, responding to other people's questions, joking, noisy interactions or laughter are set aside to surround the focus person with a quiet, reflective space.

There are some additional logistical considerations for a Clearness Committee approach. The focus person typically nominates the members of the committee, choosing 5-6 trusted people to help create the sense of safety needed for a productive session. The Committee typically meets for 2-3 hours and may have additional meetings if necessary. Similar to other circle processes, a clerk is appointed to monitor the room and time. There is also a recorder who records questions and key phrases. The meeting typically starts with silence to allow everyone to turn their attention to the focus person, and the focus begins when they are ready to break the silence. The focus person always has the right to choose not to answer a question aloud (Hoffman, 1996).

While there is still a good amount of time left and after at least an hour of questions, the Clerk should pause the interaction to ask the focus person how best to proceed. The focus person then has the opportunity to seek a different mode of interaction. Some options include:

- Holding silence, out of which people share images which come to them as they focus on the focus person;
- the Committee is asked to reflect on what has been said;
- the Committee is asked to provide affirmations of the focus persons strengths;
- the focus person invites the members to mirror back what they have heard; reflecting the focus person's language and body language and providing an opportunity for the focus person to confirm or counter those impressions;
- the focus person may ask questions of the Committee; or
- the Committee continues with more questions.

One final component of a Clearness Committee needs emphasis: the process is completely confidential. When the meeting(s) is/are over, the Committee does not speak with others about what was said and will not speak to the focus person about the issue unless the focus person requests the conversation. To further protect confidentiality, any notes are turned over to the focus person before everyone leaves the session (Hoffman, 1996).

COMING FULL CIRCLE

At this point one may ask "how would this kind of process work in an academic medical institution?" Parker Palmer notes an example of a healthcare system that created a "blame-free zone" where doctors and nurses could report mistakes without penalty, stating that the CEO had been inspired by a key principle of circles of trust (Palmer, 2004, p. 171).

The authors of The Circle Way tell the story of how circle processes transformed the culture of the True North Health Center in Falmouth, Maine:

> "Circle has taught us how to be better practitioners. As we have developed heart-centered relationships with one another, we are better able to be in "reverent participatory relationships with our patients. That is the direct result of circle. Because we work consistently in a circle-way, we work differently with our funders, vendors, and patients than most health care systems. We are relationship oriented. We know how to listen" (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 179).

To illustrate how each circle process might be applied to issues arising in an academic medical institution, a general scenario will be presented, followed by a brief analysis of how each circle process outlined in this article *might* be used by an ombuds to address issues that could arise.

SCENARIO

A key clinical department has been experiencing significant turnover of both faculty and staff. There is no obvious reason for the turnover. The department chair has been in place for 4 years, and the business manager has been in that role for 5 years.

The fiscal year has just begun, and there are three new faculty physicians and three new staff joining the department, a new group of medical students have just transitioned into the clinical environment, and there are 4 new first-year residents, 3 second-year residents and 3 third-year residents. The business manager recently announced their retirement, and the deputy business manager has been appointed as the interim business manager.

An informal leader in the group has been hearing significant concerns from both faculty and staff about concerns about reporting lines, clear expectations related to roles, and some concerns about how one of the new faculty physicians is treating the new medical students. After consulting with leaders in Human Resources, the Office of Faculty Affairs, Organizational Development, and the Ombuds Office, the informal leader has approached the Chair with a suggestion that the group use a circle process as part of the upcoming department retreat at the end of the month. Which circle processes might be appropriate?

APPLYING THE CIRCLE WAY OR THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PROCESS

Either A Circle Way process or the University of Minnesota process would fit well in a retreat format if the goals are to develop tangible, actionable steps and rules of engagement. The informal leader could meet with more formal leadership to discuss goals for a circle process in the retreat and whether to utilize the general Circle Way process or the University of Minnesota process. Either of these processes would be useful to discuss concrete issues, such as clarifying reporting lines and expectations. These processes would also be useful as team building tools, allowing all members of the group, regardless of status, to contribute to the conversations. If the leaders decided to follow the University of Minnesota structure, identifying an external guide to gather information from each participant prior to convening the larger group would help clarify the needs and interests of each member of the team.

Using either circle process, it would be important to get buy in from the entire group. This does not mean the whole group has to be excited to participate, just that they will suspend judgment and join the process. It would also be important to remind all of the participants to use "I" statements and speak from their own experience. It would also be important to remind the group that the goal of the process is not to blame or shame but rather to create a shared understanding and strengthen the group's cohesiveness.

A follow up circle 2-3 months after the retreat would be recommended. This check-in circle allows members to reflect and comment on whether the articulated goals from the retreat are being implemented and provides opportunities for course corrections if needed.

A CIRCLE OF TRUST©

If the larger group determines that building deeper connections rather than concrete action steps would be the preferred result from the retreat, A Circle of Trust© approach might be the best use of time. In keeping with a classic Circles of Trust© process, the person choosing to take on the role of host should find a quote, a poem, or a short comment that will center the group and stand as a metaphor for the work to be done.

Preparing the group for the first circle should include specific guidance on the goals of the process and the fact that this approach does not yield a final product. If a Circles of Trust© process is desired, leadership should think carefully about the need for a continuing process, not just a one-off meeting or two or three meetings during a retreat period. To be truly effective, the group needs time to develop layers of trust and the willingness to open up and be vulnerable with each other. This process would require greater time commitment, though the end results could be transformative.

3 PRACTICES

To utilize the 3 Practice approach effectively, the host(s) will need to find a framing question that would apply to the group. 3 Practices circles work best with a specific difference of opinion; applying the scenario, the framing question could be something along the lines of "Do you have a clear idea of what is expected of you as part of this team?" This process could surface many different issues; the challenge would be to make sure each individual remains open and curious and will continue to engage even when they come up against areas of disagreement.

As previously stated, the goal in a 3Practice Circle is not agreement, and the authors are careful to point out that "[t]he 3Practices do not focus on getting people to surrender their core beliefs, ideas or values" (p. 35). A 3Practice Circle is meant to foster clarity, understanding, compassion, and connection (p. 49). In the scenario, the 3Practice process could surface hidden concerns, allow new members to feel more integrated into the group, and provide the group with a different mode of communicating through difficult situations.

A CLEARNESS COMMITTEE

In this setting a Clearness Committee would be best suited to address individual areas of challenge or concern. Perhaps the new faculty member who is gaining a reputation for treating students poorly needs to sit with some trusted advisors and explore whether academic medicine is a good fit. The interim business manager might find that a Clearness Committee can help them discern if they are interested in the permanent position. The Chair might find a Clearness Committee useful to explore concerns or fears they have about their leadership given the high level of turnover in the department.

In keeping with the strictures of a Clearness Committee, each individual would choose the members of their committee. For the newest faculty member, this may mean approaching colleagues and friends from their previous role; for the Business Manager or the Chair that might mean colleagues from other departments or trusted advisors from outside the institution. The key is to establish a committee where the individual feels safe enough to be vulnerable so they can engage in deep reflection about the issue they bring to the Committee. It is also paramount that all members of the Committee commit to the fact and appearance of confidentiality, pledging that nothing that is discussed in the Committee leaves the room, and only the focus person can re-engage members of the Committee in discussion once the Committee has disbanded.

CONCLUSION

Circle processes are powerful tools. There are already examples of circle processes being used in various aspects of healthcare, from supporting healthcare professionals and transforming the structure of healthcare organizations and primary care to addressing the healthcare inequities facing indigenous populations (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014; O'Hare, 2009). The hierarchical aspects of academic medicine provide fertile ground for ombuds to adapt various circle processes to meet the needs of individuals and teams throughout an academic medical center or any other type of organization. Carefully assessing the needs of the groups and individuals invited to participate can provide important insights into which process is best suited to address the issues at hand. This article only scratches the surface of potential applications, and further research and training is necessary to ensure effective use of particular processes in any given institution. In the current climate of polarization and cancel culture, bringing people together in a circle, a powerful modality throughout human existence, holds the promise of transformation for both individuals and organizations.

REFERENCES

Baldwin, C. (1998). *Calling the Circle*, Bantam Books.

Baldwin, C. & Linnea, A. (2010). *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Center for Courage and Renewal. (2022) *Facilitator Preparation Program*. https://couragerenewal.org/facilitator-preparation-program/

Galaway B& Hudson, J. (1996). *Restorative Justice: International Perspectives*. Criminal Justice Press.

Hancock, Jim & Henderson, J. (2019). *3 Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide.* Independently Published*.*

Hoffman, J. (1996). *Clearness Committees and Their Use in Personal Discernment.* Quaker.org. https://quaker.org/legacy/atlanta/Clearness_Committees_and_Their_Use_in_Personal_Discernment.pdf

Kaminski, J. (2011). Talking circles. First Nations Pedagogy. https://firstnationspedagogy.com/talkingcircles.html

Mehl-Madrona, L., & Mainguy, B. (2014). 2014. *The Permanente Journal*. https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/13-104. PMID: 24867544

Morse, Jan (2021, November 10-13) *Basic Circle Overview*, Cal Caucus 2021: Towards Restoration: What We've Lost and What We've Found, Pacific Grove, California, USA.

O'Hare, A. (2009). Celebrating the Diabetes Talking Circles. Seva Foundation. https://www.seva.org/site/DocServer/Seva_Native_American_Diabetes_Talking_Circles.pdf

Palmer, P. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness*. Jossey-Bass.

Perreault C, Mathew S (2012) Dating the Origin of Language Using Phonemic Diversity. PLoS ONE 7(4): e35289. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0035289

Pranis, K. (2005). *The Little Book of Circle Processes.* Good Books

Pratt, J. (1996) Colonization, Power and Silence: A History of Indigenous Justice in New Zealand Society. In B. Galaway & J. Hudson (Eds.) *Restorative Justice: International Perspectives*. (pp. 137-155). Criminal Justice Press.

Wolf, P.R. and Rickard, J.A. (2003), Talking Circles: A Native American Approach to Experiential Learning. Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 31: 39-43. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2003.tb00529.x

Zane Stepka et al, Hidden signatures of early fire at Evron Quarry (1.0 to 0.8 Mya), *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2123439119

AUTHOR BIO

Natalie C. Fleury, JD: Natalie C. Fleury, JD has been an Ombuds at the Medical College of Wisconsin since 2015. From 2007-2022, she was the Program Coordinator for Dispute Resolution and Adjunct Professor of Law at Marquette University Law School, teaching the Small Claims Mediation Clinic from 2012-2022. She is also the principal of a consulting firm offering mediation, arbitration, training, and dispute resolution systems design and worked with an ADR organization providing arbitration services to DaimlerChrysler and Ford Motor Company. Ms. Fleury is the Chair of the ABA DR Section Ombuds Committee Legislative Action Task Force, a Past-Chair of the State Bar of Wisconsin (Wisbar) Section Leaders' Council, Past-Chair of Wisbar's Alternative Dispute Resolution Board, past co-chair of the Association for Conflict Resolution's Consumer Section, and a member of the ABA Dispute Resolution Section. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School and holds a Graduate Certificate in Dispute Resolution from Marquette University. (nfleury@mcw.edu)

APPENDIX

The Circle Keepers Oath

May today there be peace within.

May we trust that we are exactly where are meant to be.

May we not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in ourselves and others.

May we use the gifts that we have received and pass on the love that has been given to us.

May we be content with ourselves just the way we are.

May we let this knowledge settle into our bones and allow our soul the freedom to love, be loved, belong, and be of use.

Adapted from a poem attributed to St. Terese of Liseaux or St. Teresa of Avila and also attributed to Minne Louse Haskins in the poetry collection "The Desert" published independently in 1912.