

## **Circles of Change\* Intensify Assimilation of Guidebooks\*\* to Enhance Resilience**

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While the [Guidebooks](#)\*\* are designed to be suitable for self-study—their lessons can be enhanced by discussing the elements in a particular type of group. These are within the purview of specific assemblies called *Circles*. This protocol differs in that a brief reading is provided to be perused by each member before the group meets to anchor what could otherwise be aimless chit-chat.

This annotated summary is an overview of Tracy A. Thompson's "Circles of Change,"\* published in the Fall 2011 *Stanford Innovation Review*. Her article is copyrighted and copies are sold by the publisher. An alternative is to search the Internet where I have found complete pdf copies. Herein is an 820-word overview of the essentials. Nevertheless, it is recommended that Thompson's longer article (~4½ thousand words) also be read to appreciate the essence of Circle Groups.

*Circles of Change* can be likened to book clubs or quality circles "because their very structure creates the conditions for personal and group growth and empowerment." They are contrasted with gatherings having an assumed or actual leader, called triangle groups. A circle's essence, is distributed authority and egalitarian participation. Tracy Thompson elaborated:

In a well-functioning Circle, members experience a strong sense of belonging, a compelling commitment to shared goals, a high level of accountability to themselves and to the group, a robust climate of joint problem solving and learning among peers, an intense feeling of involvement, and high trust relationships. Everyone, sees herself as an equal part of the whole. The nonhierarchical nature that is the foundation of Circle interaction encourages every member to be a facilitator and a leader by sharing her knowledge and skills.

Whereas, a triangle focuses interaction toward an actual or assumed authority or facilitator who controls information flow, the circle distributes understanding among each participant equitably and taps into the distributed abilities of the group and its individuals. They are based on the proposition that the shared outlooks of the group enhance understanding collectively and individually. To accomplish this, each member needs to mutually understand and appreciate how circles work, their potential, and assist in maintaining order and focus.

### **Essential Equality of Circle Groups**

Egalitarian is the key condition of circle development. This understanding is paramount because the groups are

often initiated by pastors in churches, bosses among subordinates, teaches within classes, and other places where leadership behavior exists outside the group. Depending upon the subject matter, it may be suitable for them to participate—but only if they can perform as an equal and not exert authority. The *Guidebook* subjects on resilience and coping do not bestow upon anyone in this group special knowledge. Therefore, leadership can and must be shared. While it is expected that an authority figure who starts a group will want them to succeed, his or her *inability* to exert self-control and humbly participate could undermine the group's effectiveness.

With this goes a need that participation be voluntary. This might be easier to achieve in a social group or religious community than a company or police force. If intimidation is used to join, it is likely to fail, so do not bother. In some cases the circle determines the purpose and process. With the *Guidebook*, however, an agenda is provided, whose brief reading *must* be done beforehand. A [15-session syllabus](#) is suggested. *Don't try to wing it!*

A working group may wish to continue discussions of self-determined issues after the syllabus is completed. There are many subjects with open-ended personal interpretations that are possible, based upon foundational writings, to fundamentally keep the discussions focused.

### **The Developmental Experience**

Circles place the individual in control of his or her own development, rather than being educated or trained by a supposed expert. Within the circle there is no teacher or sole leader acknowledged, as the subject matter is open to individual and group elaboration, not rote learning.

By connecting with others who share their outlook we can reconsider our personal perspective. This experience may enrich how we see things and behave. Relational dynamics transcend teacher to student authoritarianism. It is easier to learn by standing among equals and sharing experiences than by being directed by educators as to what to think and feel. Human interaction promotes a camaraderie that is enhanced by personal contact. Studies about considering *online* conversational learning, but my experience makes me partial to the face-to-face group.

### **The Focused Circle of Change Group Program**

Although the material in the *Guidebook* is designed to be adequate for self-study, its cognitive and emotional effects can be enhanced by egalitarian group experience. Conversational learning is supported within the academic literature and integrated into some educational programs.

In these *focused* circles there is an agenda set by the short assigned reading, designed to keep discussions on task and off small talk. It is the collective and not a "leader" that keeps the discussion on track. Each member shares equally in making the group experience a success.