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# CHAPTER 1

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## Circle of Voices

*Circle of Voices* is a small-group exercise (four to six members) designed to secure early participation of all participants in a class, meeting, staff development training, workshop, or any other group event.

### PURPOSES

- To create an early opportunity for everyone to participate
- To make sure the widest possible range of views are heard early on
- To prevent a premature consensus or focus emerging
- To socialize people into the habit of actively listening to others' contributions
- To stop the most extroverted or domineering from having undue influence

## HOW IT WORKS

- Start by posing a question, issue, or problem to the group.
- Give everyone two minutes to think quietly about his or her responses. Stress that this phase is silent and make sure this is observed. Tell people to jot down notes summarizing their thoughts.
- When the two minutes are up ask people to form into groups of five.
- Each person in the group takes a turn to present his or her initial response to the question, issue, or problem posed. They are asked to keep their response to a minute—which usually means each person takes more like two!
- As each person gives a response there are to be no interruptions, not even supportive statements such as, “Yes, I’ve found that’s true” or “You hit the nail on the head.” These are in effect five or six brief monologues.
- Once the initial round of individual responses is over the group moves into the second round of conversation that is open and relatively unstructured. There is no order that needs to be followed. People contribute whenever they wish.
- In this second round, however, a ground rule comes into play about the kind of contributions people can make. People are allowed to talk only about what another person said in the first round. This can include asking questions about someone’s initial contribution, commenting on something that resonated, disagreeing with a comment, or indicating how a first-round contribution opened up a new line of thinking.
- The exercise ends with people reporting (1) any new perspectives or resolutions they heard and (2) any new questions that were raised.

## WHERE AND WHEN IT WORKS WELL

**In the early stages of a class, meeting, training, or workshop.** We usually do this in the first and second meetings in a series of group events.

**With groups unused to discussion process.** We have used this with freshman students in college, newly convened community groups, adults returning to higher education, and organizational members used to rigid meeting protocols.

## WHAT USERS APPRECIATE

**The initial two-minute silent pause for thinking.** Introverts, second-language speakers, and reflectively oriented group members feel comfortable because they have time to think through their response and make notes to guide their contribution.

**It gives everyone in the room the opportunity to be heard from.** People appreciate the contributions and insights from people who don't usually speak up.

**It emphasizes respectful listening.** The second ground rule forces people to pay close attention to what other members are saying.

## WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

**Participants ignoring the time.** Despite the instruction for people to take only about a minute to give their initial response in the opening round, some people are congenitally unable to do this. When you're chairing a meeting you can deal with this relatively easily by indicating (verbally or with gestures such as a time-out signal) that it's time to end the discussion of a particular item.

If you're teaching a class, running a professional development workshop, or hosting a community forum, you need to survey the room and watch for anyone who is clearly talking for too long or interrupting. When this happens, go over to the group and say, "time to move on to another contribution," "let's hear from the next person," or "remember, only one minute."

**Ignoring the second-round ground rule.** The first time they try *Circle of Voices* people often get to the open discussion and forget to focus only on what others said in the first round. If you're sitting in a group you can correct this, but when multiple groups are talking you can't check on them all. However, if this dynamic happens participants will most likely record that on the *Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ)* (technique 10) and you can address it with the group the next time it meets.

## QUESTIONS SUITED TO THIS TECHNIQUE

We like this exercise because it can accommodate so many different kinds of questions. We tend to use it at the beginning of a workshop, course, or series of meetings.

- When for the best use of time: "What do we most need to consider today?"
- To identify agenda items: "What problem has taken up most of your time during the last week?"
- As stocktaking questions: "What's gone well for you since we met?"
- For questions of application: "What's an example of the theory we discussed?"
- To assess understanding: "Why is hypothesis A plausible?" "What's the most important point made in the prereading for today?"